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JUST A WOMAN.



# JUST A WOMAN.

BY

MRS. EILOART,

AUTHOR OF

"THE CURATE'S DISCIPLINE," "MEG," "FROM THISTLES, GRAPES?"  
ETC. ETC.



IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.



LONDON :

RICHARD BENTLEY, NEW BURLINGTON STREET,

*Publisher in Ordinary to Her Majesty.*

1871.

250.4 311.



LONDON :  
R. CLAY, SONS, AND TAYLOR, PRINTERS,  
BREAD STREET HILL.

# CONTENTS OF VOL. III.

## *PART II.—(continued).*

### CHAPTER VII.

	PAGE
WHAT GERALD LEARNT THAT NIGHT . . . . .	I

### CHAPTER VIII.

HOW GERALD LEFT HIS HOME . . . . .	27
------------------------------------	----

### CHAPTER IX.

THE INQUEST . . . . .	35
-----------------------	----

### CHAPTER X.

LOYAL THROUGH ALL . . . . .	53
-----------------------------	----

## CHAPTER XI.

	PAGE
FATHER AND SON . . . . .	70

## CHAPTER XII.

IN THE TWILIGHT . . . . .	92
---------------------------	----

## CHAPTER XIII.

GERALD'S VISITOR . . . . .	110
----------------------------	-----

## CHAPTER XIV.

HOW UNDINE FOUND HER SOUL . . . . .	131
-------------------------------------	-----

## CHAPTER XV.

IN DREAM-CORNER AGAIN . . . . .	151
---------------------------------	-----

## CHAPTER XVI.

MR. CRAVEN'S ILLNESS . . . . .	173
--------------------------------	-----

*CONTENTS.*

vii

CHAPTER XVII.

	PAGE
TEMPTED . . . . .	208

CHAPTER XVIII.

CHRISTINE'S STORY . . . . .	218
-----------------------------	-----

CHAPTER XIX.

TO THE RICH, RICHES . . . . .	263
-------------------------------	-----



# JUST A WOMAN.

## CHAPTER VII.

### WHAT GERALD LEARNT THAT NIGHT.

SIMON FLINT was keeping watch and ward that night in Miss Ruddfield's garden. The fruit was ripening fast; the peaches and nectarines hung soft and velvety upon the walls, and the pears for which the garden had been famous from the time of Mrs. Timmins's grandfather, were hanging thick and large and heavy on the trees. Simon was very proud of his fruit, and he was afraid of its being stolen. Some evil-disposed persons had been helping themselves very freely to Mr. Craven's Bons Chrétiens and Marie Louises, and Simon was determined

if he could help it they should not take Miss Ruddfield's. He said nothing to her. He liked his mistress, as I have said, and had as much regard for her judgment as it was possible for him to have for anything feminine, but still she was *but* a woman, and from a woman what could be expected but idle fears and fancies lest, if Simon encountered the would-be thieves of her fruit, he should either handle them too roughly, or they should maltreat him? Simon smiled grimly to himself, and thought he would take his chance of the latter event, and arming himself with a stout cudgel, repaired a little before twelve to Miss Ruddfield's garden, letting himself in as he always did with his pass key. He had gone to bed as soon as he had had his supper, which he always took directly he went home from work, undisturbed even by the news which one of the neighbours came to tell him of Mr. Craven's sudden seizure. The event was thrilling all Stretton, and giving it more to

talk about than it had had for many a day, but Simon heard it placidly enough. What had it got to do with his pears and apples? He could not take many ideas into his head at once, and the one which predominated there now was the protection of Miss Ruddfield's fruit. Therefore he had slept his sleep undisturbed by the great event of the day, and awoke refreshed and vigorous, to keep his watch.

It was a clear moonlight night, and North End House and its garden looked exquisitely still and peaceful. The soft air was perfumed with the autumn roses and the honeysuckle which grew thick against the windows of Miss Ruddfield's sitting-room. Through the shrubberies at the end of the garden the river glimmered in the moonshine, and not a sound broke the stillness when Simon entered it and looked stealthily around. The town was sleeping quietly enough after all the stir of the day. Mr. Craven had been stricken down, but people could not go on talking about it till past



midnight. Besides the theme would keep, and they would wake up to it to-morrow, and find a little fresh excitement in discussing it. The house was as still as the town: to all appearance every one was at rest in it. Simon looked up, and saw not a light. "Tired out with their galivantin', I reckon," said he. "I sometimes thinks rich folks work a deal harder nor us poor uns. Miss Ruddfield looked well, though, when she went off. For a woman of her age she's a wonder. I lay Miss Claude 'll never come up to her."

There was a large pear-tree against the side of the house, on which pears grew larger than were to be seen anywhere else out of Jersey. They were the pride of Simon's heart; he intended to exhibit them at the autumn flower-show in Arkleigh. They were hardly ripe yet, but they would ripen by keeping, and fetch, Simon knew, if gathered now, a first-rate price in Covent Garden at Christmas time. He took

his seat at a little distance from this tree, so that he could keep his eye on it, and at the same time command the whole of the garden. There was an archway overhung with ivy, and this screened him from sight. He coiled himself up in it, and made himself as comfortable as circumstances permitted. He would have liked his pipe, but was afraid of the smell of the tobacco betraying him, and if any interlopers came, Simon wanted not merely to frighten them off, but to punish them.

He held his cudgel tightly, and felt the thick end of it with his horny palm. "This'll make their bones tingle again, I reckon," he said to himself. "They that cum here'll get more than they count on." He had not much sentiment in him, but he looked up at the house, and wondered which was Miss Ruddfield's window, and whether she was sleeping or not; then he pictured her look when he told her he had captured the thieves who were after her fruit. "She'll be

main sorry for 'em, an' say 'Poor fellers!' an' if they're sent to prizen—which they shall be if I have my way in the matter—be seein' after their wives while they're layin' by, an' be cockerin' them up with soups an' stuff. It's jest like wimmen: she'd ha' been a fine feller, would Miss Ruddfield, if she had not bin born a gal. I wonder, now, what time they folks will cum. I'll be here to-morrow if they don't show to-night. I ha' pruned they trees an' mulched 'em an' watched 'em for Miss Ruddfield, an' not for they."

He was like a great dog sitting there, looking up at his mistress's window. Just a dog in his rough, grotesque fidelity, in his dumb, silent service. Perhaps no other employer than Christine Ruddfield would have called forth such faithfulness. For most others he would have done his day's work, and come and gone without another thought of the matter. But if there was anything good in men or women with whom she came

in contact, Christine Ruddfield was sure to draw it out.

Other thoughts slowly bestirred themselves in Simon's sluggish mind. "I wonder what Marster Gerald will say when he hears o' this night's work. *He'll* not be for lettin' the fellows git off with a reprimand, as they call it. He's a little hard, an' a reg'lar 'cute un. Tew think o' his ever havin' bin a boy under me. A nice un he wer! She'd never ha' done any good with him if she hadn't put him to book-larning. He wor a reg'lar fule at gardenin'. 'Twor an odd thing to do, but he'll dew her credit. He'll die richer than t'other, that all the fuss has bin about to-day. Lor, it seems but yesterday since the two were rampin' an' riotin' over the flower-beds, an' when Miss Ruddfield told 'em to cum off I told her the land weren't wide enuff for 'em; the lawn and the paths weren't enuff for 'em to stretch their legs in without cumin' over the geraniums and such like."

Presently there was a step on the gravel.

Simon bestirred himself, and grasped his cudgel yet a little tighter. A light yet stealthy step—not at all the tread of one used to follow the plough or labour in the fields. The old soldier peered out from behind the ivy, and saw the slight small figure of a man advancing towards the house. The moonlight showed him that though his clothes might once have been good, they had long since ceased to belong to any one with any pretensions to respectability. But it was clear that this intruder came for other purposes than fruit-stealing. He had neither basket nor bag with him, and he went straight up to the house, and looked up at the windows, as Simon had done before him, with a sufficiently nonchalant air. If an intending burglar, he was taking things easily : he had no accomplices, and as far as Simon could see no tools, but presently a small file was drawn out, and Simon heard its rasping against the bar of the window-shutters.

Simon felt thankful that he had taken up

his position when he had—he should save more than his mistress's fruit: but he kept perfectly still, intending to secure the would-be robber when he had entered the house. "An' he'll git lagged for seven year, or maybe fourteen," thought Simon; "'specially if I let him bide till he's laid hold o' something. I wonder if there's anythin' partic'lar he's after. Where does missus keep her money, now?"

The burglar seemed to know, for he was not long in effecting an entrance into the room, although the fastenings had been strengthened since a certain surreptitious entrance had been effected some years before; and then he went straight up to a cabinet in a recess, and commenced working at the lock with a picklock.

"I fancy she keeps some spare cash here," he muttered. "I know Mrs. Timmins did. There may be ornaments. That little fool Alethea has told me wonders of a certain secret drawer."

He wanted no light for his work—the moon

shone clear and pale, and gave sufficient, and he opened drawer after drawer in evident disappointment—Simon watching all the time, and grimly enjoying his discomfiture. At last he came to a flat surface with neither knob nor keyhole. This, then, must be the secret drawer, and if there were any treasures in it—bank-notes or jewels—he would find them. He set to work to discover the opening and at last obtained it, when to his infinite disgust he only found some faded flowers, an old locket, and, last, a baby's woollen shoe. He drew this up and held it to the light, muttering with a sneer, "Some women's sentimental rubbish! To think of her hoarding this all these years!"

Mr. Frederick Craven had resolved to possess himself of any hoards Miss Ruddfield might have by her. His position was desperate, although the immediate heir of a man who was dangerously ill. Not quite so desperate, however, as he had led her to believe. He had enough for the immediate necessities

of life, but he would have been very glad to have been furnished at Miss Ruddfield's expense with some of the luxuries. He would not have been at all daunted if she had detected him in his attempt ; and as to her maids, even if they had overheard the file they would have been too frightened to have stirred out. But he had reckoned without his host in the person of Simon Flint, and also forgotten that he himself had placed about Miss Ruddfield one who was likely to be a very efficient protector to her.

Gerald's chamber was situated over Christine's sitting-room. The rasping of the file had attracted him ; he had not gone to sleep, having too much to think of. He had told his love story, and to all appearance it had been favourably heard ; was not that enough to keep him awake till past midnight ? He would not have gone to sleep for the world ! It was so delicious to lie in the calm, still night and think over Rosalind's blushes, and her promise to "think over it." Was she think-



ing over it? lying awake just as he was doing, and pondering over their mutual affection? Of course she was, bless her! Would it be proper to go and see her in the morning? How long a time would she take to think over it? What might a young lady reasonably require when she made such a promise? He would ask Claude—tell her all about it in the morning. He would have done so this last night, only it had seemed so unfeeling to be thinking over one's own love and one's own happiness when such a terrible thing had happened at the Hall. Claude seemed thoroughly "cut up" by it: good little soul, she always felt for everybody's troubles. But—what was that noise? He sat up in bed to listen, and the training of his early life quickened his senses, and told him what it was, and what it meant. Gerald warmed directly to the fight, just as he might have warmed twelve years ago, only with this difference, that now he was on the side of law and property, instead of being against it. Once

all Gerald's sympathies would have been with the "cracksman;" now they were enlisted against the burglar. He got up, partly dressed himself, and opening his door crept stealthily on the landing—not so stealthily, however, but that Miss Ruddfield heard him.

She had been lying awake too, but with far other thoughts than Gerald's. Restless and uneasy, shamed and troubled, she had been tossing wearily about, not daring to look forward to the morrow, wondering only what new phase of torment it would bring, when the sound of Gerald's footsteps struck on her ear. *She* sat up and listened in her turn, pushing the long heavy hair away; then presently arose, and throwing on a dressing-gown, crept to the landing after him. She leaned over it, and saw Gerald at the partly-open door of her sitting-room. Then she knew what was going on. Some instinct told her what he saw, and she clung to the balusters in her agony. Must the felon sin even in the sight of his own son? Had he broken in again

upon her quiet home only to show how vile a thing he was to the eyes of his own flesh and blood? Could not this have been spared her? Would not the father leave one poor rag of decency to cover his baseness from the sight of his son?

Such a storm of shame and anger in the poor troubled soul above, and Gerald, unconscious of it all, was standing at the door below, looking on with a little amusement. "An amateur, I should say; doesn't handle his tools with the air of a master of his craft. What's he got there! The confounded rascal! Some treasures poor Aunt Christine never meant any eyes but her own to see. When I *do* lay hold of you, my fine fellow, I'll give your throat a tighter grip for handling them so rudely. Surely I've seen that fellow's face before! Hullo! a baby's sock—queer thing for Aunt Christine to be hoarding. Some little nephew or niece, I suppose, gone to the angels. Ha! the rascal's got something now. Anything in it, I wonder?"

Frederick Craven had laid hands on a long red Cashmere purse, once bright with beads and tassels, which was now dimmed and tarnished. It had been bought by Launcelot Chastelar at a charity bazaar, and given by him to Christine. It was so valueless that she had thought she might keep it, and had put it away with the dead flowers which he had given her on a birthday, and the little boot whose baby wearer she at the time believed was sleeping in the churchyard of Santa Felice. Simon Flint saw the purse too, as the despoiler turned towards the window for the purpose of investigating its contents: it was what he wanted, to take the burglar red-handed, and bring it home to him. He stepped forward, and in a second there was a crash of furniture as he grappled the intruder by the throat, and shook his slight frame with all his strength, and a cry from Gerald, who saw himself anticipated, of "Well done, old fellow!" as he stepped forward to help him.

“Well done! so you’ve turned amateur watchman, have you? Can you keep him while I get some rope to tie him with?”

“I can hold him well enough, Marster Gerald, if yew’ll just run down to the tool-house: there’s a heap o’ clothes-line there, ready for next washing day. Bring it here, an’ I’ll hev him fast in no time.”

“Sure of that?” said Gerald, surveying the captive. “He’s a venomous-looking rascal. Hadn’t I better hold him while you get the rope?”

“Hold, Marster Gerald! My arms may be stiff, but they’re tough, an’ I’ve gotten a grip on him that he won’t easily get quit on. Don’t waste time in chatter, but get us the rope, an’ then we’ll take him off to the station-house, an’ you can tell the missus of it quiet-like to-morrow. It’s no use wakin’ her to-night. She’ll go into ’sterics—wimmen allus do if yew give ’em the least excuse for ’em.”

Away Gerald ran, and Christine Ruddfield

sat on the stairs now, fairly unable to move. What should she do? What could she do, to avert this last and crowning shame? It seemed such an age of misery all compressed into one moment. She felt utterly bewildered, crushed and helpless. All her self-reliance and energy had left her. This new emergency was paralysing her: it must be met and grappled with in some manner, but how?—what words could she find to tell her servant whom he held, and let Gerald know why this wretched thief must be suffered to escape? Somehow she felt herself creeping down the stairs, holding on by the balusters, and then she heard a voice—the very voice she had expected—the only voice in the world that *so* heard would not have surprised her.

“You had better let me go, my good fellow! You’ll do yourself no good by keeping me. Go and call your mistress down, and see what she will say to you for laying hands on an old friend of hers.”

Simon chuckled. "Miss Ruddfield hasn't much to do wi' the likes o' you. Where wud I find yer, I'd like to know, when I came down. Doan't twist like that; ye'll not git away, fight as hard as ye will."

She heard sounds as of scuffling and wrestling. Oh, if the old man would only let him go. There was a desperate struggle going on, that was evident, and presently there was a loud cry from Simon as the sharp venomous teeth of his captive almost met in his flesh. For one moment he must have loosened his grasp, for one moment slackened his hold, for his prisoner burst from him, but in doing so must have used such force as to precipitate Simon to the ground. It might have been unintentional: no one could ever tell. Christine Ruddfield heard a heavy fall and then a smothered groan, as the old man's head struck against the foot of her round writing-table, and Gerald, hurrying back with the rope, saw the end of the struggle: the stooping figure

bending over the hands that grasped him, the sharp cry, then the sudden twist from the grasp that was evidently relaxed, and the old man falling heavily forward, while his opponent hurried from him.

Out of the window and past Gerald like a flash, through the garden, over the wall, and into the field beyond. Gerald was a quick runner, but he was distanced; he ran on towards the town, and then in one of the narrow alleys that skirted the river lost sight of him. He might have got on one of the barges, sought refuge in one of the hovels near; there was no telling where he would find a hiding-place, when there were so many offering themselves. "Run to earth!" said Gerald, "and I can't spare the night to dislodge him. He may have associates, and the house is exposed — and that poor old fellow will want looking to: I'd better make the best of my way back to him, call up Aunt Christine, secure the house and then set the police after this scoundrel.



I dare say he'll lie *perdu* till the morning ;  
as soon as I can I'll join in the hunt myself.  
I could swear to his face anywhere — the  
rascal !”

Back he went as quickly as he could. Indeed he had not been three minutes away, though to Christine Ruddfield waiting in her house with her old servant senseless at her feet it seemed an age. Gerald had no anticipation of the scene that presented itself to him. He had seen Simon fall to the ground, but that was all. An ugly bruise or a black eye was the worst that he expected to see. If he had found Simon looking out for him at the window, or in the garden, it would not at all have surprised him. Instead of which, what he did see through the window of Miss Ruddfield's sitting-room was her old servant lying prone and helpless on the ground, his head supported by a sofa pillow, and his mistress bending over him trying to pour something down his throat. She was as pale as the old man, with a fixed set hard look on her face that Gerald had never seen there

before : something of the same look that had showed itself to Frederick Craven that afternoon, only now and then softening as she looked on the old man who had shown a dog's fidelity and met with a dog's reward. She looked up at Gerald as he came in, then pointed with a significant look to a cut on the left temple. Not so very large, not so very terrible to look at, but coming just where it did, and with the force of a heavy fall, enough to let an old man's life out. Gerald paled as he looked, it was such an eerie sight. Old Simon lying there grimmer and more gaunt than usual in that unnatural helplessness, looking, in his soiled fustian suit with his rough horny hands and heavy boots, so out of keeping with the bright tasteful room in which he lay, so strange a contrast to the fair woman with her set white face, her delicate hands, and her rich masses of hair bending over him. What made her look like that? It was not pity for the poor old man she was tending. Was it a righteous anger against his murderer? For the old man

was dying, surely. Gerald knew little of death—since his early days in Seven Dials had never been brought in contact with it, but that heavy breath, that ghastly face, that stiff rigid frame, could surely have but one meaning.

“I know the villain,” he said slowly, “and I’ll hang him for this night’s work. Poor old Simon! He shan’t die unavenged if there’s law or justice to be found. As surely as I stand here, Aunt Christine, I’ll bring his murderer to the gallows.”

If possible, Christine Ruddfield turned a deadlier, ghastlier pallor than before. Then she looked up at Gerald. “*You* will never do that! Let the issue of this night’s work be what it may, *you* at least must be deaf to all you have heard, blind to all you have seen!”


She arose and stood on her feet, looking taller, statelier than Gerald had ever seen her: a woman, he felt instinctively, to be obeyed, let her behest be what it might. She spoke slowly and distinctly; she had

an awful task to go through, and she had nerved herself to it. She was a wholly different being from the trembling, shrinking woman who had cowered such a little time back upon the stairs. Some desperate need had called forth all the latent strength of her nature; some awful peril more terrible than death, some impending horror, had roused her at last. Her words seemed to be uttered without any movement of her lips. Distinct as they were, they were hissed rather than spoken.

“I believe that man will die—I believe him to be murdered. I know his murderer to be as vile a thing as ever disgraced man’s form. This night’s work is nothing to all that he has done. Death seems such a little thing compared to blighting a whole life, and yet not taking it! But you must say nothing, Gerald. Go to your room; if you are called you must be found sleeping, and you must never breathe one word of this night’s work. I have roused the

servants, I have sent one for a doctor, the other to light a fire, and be in readiness to obey any directions that may be given. I don't know how I've done it all, but I have. Now, come with me, and when we are in your own room and sure that no one can hear us, not even the poor thing lying there, I will tell you why you will do well to forget that you have ever looked on the man who struck him down."

She opened the door of the room and peered out. All was silence, but for the crackling of the wood where the servant was kindling the fire. She listened attentively: no one was near: but for that, and the movements of the girl in the kitchen, the whole house was silent. She took Gerald by the hand, and led him softly up the carpeted stairs, leaving her candle in the room below, as if she feared that its light might betray their movements. He went with her as if he had been a child; she compelled him into silence and obedience. She took him into



his own room, and closed the door. "You will undress as soon as I am gone; it is possible you may be aroused. I will try to prevent their doing that if possible; you must feign sleep the deepest if you are called; you must forget everything that has passed to-night. You must hear of it if told with as much surprise as you can assume. But I will spare you all I can. If you are not roused to-night I will send you from this by the earliest morning. You *cannot* get into the witness-box and swear away the life of that poor fellow's murderer. You *cannot* say a word that will tend to criminate him or set suspicion on his track. Vile as he is, he must be safe for you. Vengeance *must* reach him; not for this night's work alone, but for all the evil days that he has lived; but never through your hand. Gerald, God strengthen you to hear what I am about to say! The fellow who invaded my house for the purposes of robbery, the brutal wretch

who struck the poor old faithful creature down to his death, must be safe for you for ever! Gerald, you are a thousand times worse than orphaned—infinately worse than nameless! The man whom you would hunt to the gallows, who has brought death to my house to-night, and oh, how much more than death all the many years since you drew breath, must be scatheless from your touch, sacred from your vengeance, for he is—oh Gerald, may God comfort you!—your father!”

## CHAPTER VIII.

### HOW GERALD LEFT HIS HOME.

“I’D ha’ gotten him as good as he give, but he wor tew many for me ; but, missus, I ha’ saved yer stuff.” Then presently : “ It wor an ugly push : he meant mischief, he did. To think o’ goin’ out like this ! but he won’t cum nigh the house agin, missus.”

These were Simon Flint’s last words. Whether the poor soul had any glimmering of the hereafter to which he was hastening, of any world where there would be no cabbages to grow nor trees to prune, no one could say. Grimly and dumbly he went to his death ; just as he had gone about his work in life. Of the hand that



had felled him ; of the effort he had made to protect his mistress's interests, he could say nothing. He just rallied his last flickering strength to utter these few words, and then, as if satisfied that he had told his mistress enough to show how he had guarded her, closed his eyes and lay stiff and stark, resting at last after a lifetime's labour, with the ghastly majesty of death ennobling the spare frame, and even the coarse toil-stained habiliments so soon to be changed for the dreary livery we all put on when our Master summons us to attend His court.

A few minutes after Simon Flint's soul had winged its way from the poor tene-ment of clay that had held it so long in such a narrow prison, gone where it might plead that according to its darkened lights it had done its best—given faithful service and been loyal to the death, and if it had known little more than a brute had at least possessed brute virtues—Gerald woke from a troubled sleep into which, weary with

watching and waiting, he had fallen half an hour before, and saw Miss Ruddfield standing by his bedside. He was not undressed, and springing to his feet saw her as she stood pale and heavy-eyed, looking more broken down and wretched in the morning light, which shows so cruelly the wear and tear of either soul or body. Was it all a dream—all the events of the last few hours? Were those words which had burned themselves into his brain only its own invention? He had only to look in Christine Ruddfield's face to read the answer to his question.

Presently she spoke, just in the same dry hard tone she had used before. All the music seemed to have gone from her voice, just as the colour and light had left her face. She went on much as if she were repeating a task, saying something which she had nerved herself to say, and must get through as best she could.

“You must go away from here at once

Gerald. There will be an inquest upon Simon Flint, and I cannot have you here. You will betray yourself inevitably. The old man's murderer must escape from any vengeance that you or I can bring upon him. I did not see his face—I can swear to that at least—pray God they will not ask me if I heard his voice! For *your* sake he must escape—at any rate he must not be convicted on your evidence. You will want to know something more than I told you last night. I cannot go through the whole miserable story now; I have need of every particle of courage I possess; but this wretched homicide, Frederick Craven, long believed dead even by me, and who yesterday sprung as it were from the grave that would not hold him to craze that poor old man at the Hall with the sight, is your father. For ten years I believed you dead: for ten years he left you to live or die—to become thief, liar, whatever evil thing you might be, without giving your

existence a thought. Heaven knows why he did so at last. Chance threw you in his way, and he told me who the boy was I had taken under my roof. I knew him too well to believe him without further proof. I got it—I was satisfied—and you know since then what your life has been. God help you, Gerald! The vilest outcast, the lowest criminal with whom you might have come in contact in those wretched early days, when he who gave you life seemed to have cared not how it perished, soul and body, would have been a parent thinking of whom you would feel less cause to loathe your own flesh and blood because it was kin to his than he who is indeed your father.”

Possibly. Mr. Frederick Craven was not a parent to be proud of, even by one who, like Gerald, had, whenever he had given the subject of his parentage a thought, felt that it might be that the less he knew about it the better. But his dazed, bewildered brain at

least realized the fact that he must have had more parents than one; and was the woman whom he had almost worshipped all these years, looking up to her with the blind idolatrous devotion that the young so often feel for their seniors when exceptionally gifted, was she, his ideal of all that was true and beautiful and best worth loving in womanhood, was she connected with him by almost the closest, dearest ties that ever bind man to woman. If so, he could forgive the miserable creature whom he had hunted that night the fact of his existence. He had loved Christine Ruddfield for years, with an affection of a far deeper character than that with which Miss Rosalind Chastelar's bright face had inspired him. He would idolize her now. Rosalind, and all the pretty love-dream he had been weaving a few hours back, sunk into the background at the possibility that this, his queen of women, his ideal of all that was truest, noblest, best in feminine humanity, could be his mother.

For a moment the impossibility that such a nature could ever have allied itself with such as Frederick Craven, did not occur to him. Afterwards he called himself a fool, for thinking that such a thing could be. "I will do whatever you tell me in this matter," he said, "you have a right to command my obedience every way, is it not so—*mother?*?"

She looked at him with wondering eyes. What did he mean by thus addressing her? Then the consciousness of all the words implied rushed on her, crimsoning her face and throat.

"Haven't I told you?" she said sadly. "It seems I hardly know what I should say, what withhold. Gerald, your mother is living, but I doubt whether it will ever be safe to address her by that name. She has suffered so much at your father's hands, that she may well be forgiven if she never felt any great grief for his child, when she believed him dead. We are kin, very near kin, Gerald; I am "Aunt Christine" in truth, but although you may never call her so,

my sister Alethea is your mother." Her voice had something of its usual sweetness as she spoke, then she roused herself and said hastily—"I will write to you and tell you more when I *can*, but you must leave this at once—leave me with the *dead*, whom neither you nor I may avenge. I have thought of everything, planned everything. You will go to your lodgings ; take only what little luggage you can put in a carpet-bag—I shall say business has called you away. I must get through it all as best I may—God help me! but you, at least, must not have the blood of this wretched homicide upon your head."

So in the grey of the early morning, almost as if he had himself been the felon he was trying to screen, Gerald hastened away from the quiet town ; leaving the dead in his grim rest, and Christine Ruddfield to cope as she might with this new burden thrust upon her.

## CHAPTER IX.

### THE INQUEST.

THE little town was alive the next morning with the horror of Simon Flint's murder, and when the inquest came on, and no further light was thrown upon the perpetrator of the deed but that gathered from Miss Ruddfield's broken evidence, the horror and mystery deepened. The old man had been struck down in defending his mistress's property, but who had struck him, and was there sufficient motive for the crime? Outrages of this kind were so rare in the neighbourhood, and the motive for this one seemed so inadequate. Was there a burglar



from London in the midst of their quiet? Even Mr. Craven's alarming illness lost its interest in this new and unlooked-for event. Old men must die sooner or later, and if death came and found them peaceably in their beds, it was after all but an everyday matter. But an old man slain in defending his mistress—a quiet home invaded—a lady's household scared and terrified—this was something far more out of the common than even the richest man in the neighbourhood being struck down by paralysis. People had looked forward with a horror, whose eagerness had something not altogether displeasing in it, to the inquest, and the interest the state of affairs at the Hall might otherwise have excited became paled and dimmed by the side of this deeper tragedy occurring in their very midst.

After all, there was nothing for the public in general to speculate about as to matters there. Mr. Craven was likely to die, but his young kinsman was ready to succeed

him. There was no mystery, no uncertainty there; nothing for any one to lose themselves in a maze of delicious excitement about—to wonder what fresh evidence would be brought forward at the trial; what Miss Ruddfield would say, and how she would look; whether there would be any chance of catching the murderer; and if Government would offer a reward for his apprehension: all this was greatly more amusing than speculations as to whether Mr. Craven would linger a week or a month, whether a London doctor would be had down, or the local medical advice be thought sufficient.

Of all that was overhanging the Hall no one but the few who had been with Mr. Craven when he received his death-wound was aware. Percy Craven himself was not acquainted with the probability of his being inherited. Mr. Craven might recover, in that case it would be time enough to tell of his young kinsman with his altered views, when all that could be done for

his interests had been done. If he did not recover, why then Percy Craven must learn how the world had changed with him, and it would remain for them to see whether he had any rights worth fighting for.

“Which he may have if that fellow’s son is not legitimate, and the probabilities are greatly against that,” said Mr. Chastelar, but to this his son made no answer. In his heart he had solved the matter. This boy whom Christine had maintained all these years was Frederick Craven’s son and *hers*. That explained everything. She had been ashamed of her husband—nay more, fearing that the law would take him if his existence were known; perhaps, poor creature! she had had some miserable relentings towards the child her own was to supplant—had pitied him as she had seen him growing up by her side, and partly it might be for her own honour’s sake (though after all what was the honour worth of Frederick Craven’s wife?), and partly out of compassion to him, have let her own son

lose his heritage. He did not think a bit the better of her for that. It was just a woman, he said contemptuously,—just a woman's illogical way of trying to right one wrong by committing another. So he had little to say when his father spoke of the possibility of Percy Craven's coming at last into his own; he neither contradicted nor assented, but let the other speculate as hopefully as he pleased on the almost certain illegitimacy of the heir Frederick Craven had put forth.

He had not told him all that had passed; he could not bring himself to show Christine in all her miserable weakness, and from Mr. Craven little had come but broken sentences while able to speak, and now speech had gone, and he lay helpless and silent, with nothing but the faint light returning to the eyes, when Percy drew near, to show any consciousness. Of all the stir in the little world without he knew nothing; his own troubles had crushed him down—of

those he was still aware; the poor mind survived the wreck of the body just enough to know its own helplessness—to feel that it could not bid the lips tell, or the hand write its meaning—that in all the ruin that had come, in all the downfall of its hopes, it could do nothing but acquiesce. Surely if this indeed was so, then upon George Craven a heavier punishment had fallen for his supineness and his weakness than is meted to many a man for his guilt and impiety.

That was what Launcelot Chastelar thought, but he had soon enough to think of in the tragedy that was stirring all Stretton to its core, and the report of which startled Arkleigh. Something, he would not call it more than curiosity even to himself, impelled him to be present at the inquest. It might be a lingering weakness, the shadow of the old regard for Christine Ruddfield, that prompted him to see how she bore the painful ordeal of an appearance in public under such circum-

stances, but there he was, unseen by her, in the crowd at the further part of the room.

Business connected with Mr. Craven's affairs had brought him over to Stretton that day. He was to meet his father in the evening at the Hall—a lease was to have been signed that morning, and Mr. Chastelar said that he would drive over in the afternoon, and judge for himself how Mr. Craven was progressing, and how long it might be before he would be able to attend to business. He must recover sooner or later, Mr. Chastelar argued; he was a younger man than himself, and the shock that he had sustained, though severe, ought not to prove fatal. Father and son alike felt their position complicated through Percy's ignorance of his position—it was impossible to institute a regency when the heir apparent might so soon be displaced; and yet different matters connected with the estate required looking to at once.

There was a crowd round the inn where

the inquest was held. Had there been space, half the town would have been present in the room. A murder was such an unusual thing in Stretton. Launcelot Chastelar found admittance, and, taking his post in the back part of the room, watched the proceedings—at first with not too much interest, till several points in attracted his attention. Where was Gerald Crane? He had been sleeping in the house the night of the murder but had left it the next day—Miss Ruddfield said, on important business. That was singular—surely he might have stayed with Miss Ruddfield at this trying time, even if, like the servants, he had seen and heard nothing of the murder till all was over. The two maids had given their evidence in nearly identical terms. Their room was too far away from Miss Ruddfield's sitting-room for them to hear anything that took place there. Their mistress had called them up, telling them that some one had broken into the house, and that the gardener Simon, in defending it, was seriously wounded. She

bade them be very quiet, for fear of alarming Miss Alethea, and when they asked if they should call Mr. Gerald told them not to disturb him, he would be useless. They described the state of the room, and Simon's condition: that was all they had to say, and then Miss Ruddfield gave her evidence. She had her veil up, and her features were calm as ever. She was paler than usual, but that was not to be wondered at under the circumstances. Her voice was clear and unbroken, the sweet melody of its tones as liquid and fluent as ever, as she told her story. She had heard a noise in the night, awoke, and, partly dressing, went on the stairs and listened. There was a sound as of scuffling below, and she distinctly heard her gardener's voice. He appeared to be holding some one who was attempting to escape. Then there came a cry and a fall, and she hurried into the room and saw the old man on the ground. It was all the work of a moment: there was



no time to call for help, even if help had been near, and the other bedrooms were all further away from the morning-room than her own. She did not call Mr. Gerald Crane—her first thought was to see what could be done for Simon Flint; her next, to keep her sister, who was always in delicate health, from being disturbed. Perhaps it might have been as well if she had sent Mr. Crane in pursuit of the burglar, or desired him to give information at once to the police, she could very well see that now, but at the time she was nearly stupefied with fright and horror.

Everyone felt full of pity for Miss Ruddfield—almost everyone at least. It was such a dreadful thing to happen to a single lady, and she seemed so full of concern for her wounded servant, and her ailing sister. It would have been too much to have expected of her that she should have acted as calmly and sensibly as a mere man; who would feel for nothing, care for nothing but that justice should

be done, and the offender caught. The coroner was all deference and consideration to her; the manner in which he had asked her to be seated while giving her evidence was a miracle of courtesy; he seemed anxious not to press his questions, lest in any way they should jar upon her susceptibilities; and his sympathy for her was only a reflection of the feeling that pervaded the whole room.

With two exceptions. Launcelot Chastelar did not believe her. Through all the clear music of that voice something rang which told him the woman before him was in some way or other concealing the truth. Why should she? It was impossible to tell, but she had done so many strange things; the one wretched mistake of her life had set everything wrong from the first. Sometimes he felt as if he could think anything evil of her now. How could she stoop as she had done, and pause at any vileness? Of Frederick Craven's wife he could believe anything.

Looking round the court, he saw the keen face of Lawrence Wright. Whatever had brought him there? He remembered now that it was a client of his to whom the lease of the Upland Farm was to have been granted that day. Perhaps that had something to do with his coming to Stretton, but why in the name of all that was impertinent should he have entered the Beehive Inn that day, and be looking as he was looking at Christine Ruddfield. Launcelot Chastelar gave her that name still; by a strange inconsistency he believed her to be Frederick Craven's wife, and yet in his thoughts it seemed as if she must be Christine Ruddfield for ever. What right had the other to show so plainly as he did his disbelief of all that Miss Ruddfield had said? Why couldn't he accept the story as the coroner, the jury, everyone indeed but Mr. Launcelot Chastelar, had done? And to look at her like *that*—as if she were an actress performing her part, and he was studying how every look and tone were inspired, and

speculating on their effect upon the audience, who, unlike him, believed the semblance a reality.

Mr. Chastelar waited for the jury to give their verdict, which they were not long in doing—“Wilful murder against some person unknown”—and then he left the court, and in doing so passed Christine so nearly that he almost touched her. She started as she saw him, then she looked at him with such a world of pitiful deprecation in her face, such a dumb mute beseeching, as if imploring him not to judge her hardly, that his heart was stirred to something like pity. God help her! She had gone far wrong, and fallen from the heights on which she towered, but surely he might compassionate her a little. He bowed gravely and sadly and moved on; as he went he almost fancied that he saw her spring forward, and her small gloved hand half extended as if to detain him. Was it a fancy, or was it the embodiment of his thought? He could never tell, but if ever

Christine Ruddfield had longed to throw herself before him and ask him to have pity, and, in his untempted strength, not to judge her upon whose weakness too hard a burden had been laid too harshly, it was then.

On he went, telling himself that movement of hers could have arisen only in his fancy; and whether it was so or not, Christine Ruddfield walked quietly home, carrying, as she had carried for years, the burden which at last was beginning to be more than she could bear.

Launcelot Chastelar found his father in the study at the Hall—an old room with nothing striking about it, not even its age, for even that was not ancient enough. The books were not very numerous, for the Cravens had never been great patrons of literature, and the furniture was worn and faded—it had served for at least four generations; but the view over the park from either of the two long narrow windows was extensive, and beyond the fence that skirted

it, fields now waving with golden grain or pastures with cattle browsing in them, could be seen. And all the fields which were in sight belonged to the old helpless man upstairs whose eyes it was so much more than probable would never rest upon them again. This was what Mr. Chastelar was thinking—thinking, too, with less of pity for his old friend upstairs than of contempt for his successor, and a little anger that Mr. Craven had not long since followed his advice, and by marrying most probably prevented any chance of Frederick Craven's reigning in his stead. Mr. Brown was in the study, too; he had been sitting there the last hour, rather boring Mr. Chastelar, if the truth must be told, so that the entrance of his son was a relief to him.

“I think we will go home now,” he said; “I have been looking over those papers, but nothing can be done about those leases till Mr. Craven recovers or——” And they knew what he meant,—till Mr.

Craven had gone to his fathers, and his kingdom had passed to another.

“Prowse won't like waiting,” said Launcelot Chastelar.

“No, and it's not as if——” then he checked himself, seeing Mr. Brown. He was about to add that it was not as if Percy Craven was about to enter, as it might have been expected he would do, upon his heritage, but he could not go into all this before the Curate—time enough for him to learn the change in Percy's fortunes when the young man knew them himself; and in another second Percy came in, looking worried and anxious, but above all as if he did not know what to do with himself. He was very sorry—very heartily sorry for the poor old gentleman upstairs; if he could have done anything for him at any cost of trouble or time he would, but as it was there just seemed nothing to do but to lounge about the house. He could settle to nothing—it seemed so heartless to be fishing or riding

with the head of his house in that state. He never cared very much for reading, and if he had, the thought of that poor wan face upstairs, with the eyes that seemed to have so much they wanted to tell him, would have come between him and the page. Besides, it would have seemed like a brute "to be troubling himself about a pack of nonsensical love stories when there was such trouble as this in the house." He did not feel it right even to think of his own; he felt a little shamefaced when he first saw the father of his adored one, but told himself he had no business to let such thoughts crop up now—and yet they had been troubling him all the day, and he had been trying his best to keep them down. He was glad to see them all, and to ask them to stay to lunch, and then to ring and order it at once. That, at least, was something for him to do; and presently the footman brought him in Mr. Lawrence Wright's



card, with an intimation that that gentleman was waiting to see him.

Percy took the card, and looked nervously at Mr. Chastelar. "What can I say to him—of course it is business he has come about? What shall I do? what can I tell him?" Then, brightening up, "What a blessing you are here!—you will know how to take him off my hands."

## CHAPTER X.

### LOYAL THROUGH ALL.

MR. WRIGHT had called at the house in his client's interests, as he told Percy when he saw him. Mr. Prowse was anxious about the lease which had been promised him. Percy brought him into the study and turned him over to Mr. Chastelar. "I know nothing of it all," he said, "Mr. Chastelar can tell you everything." Then he slipped out of the room, glad that they were there to screen him in his helplessness, and sat down in the dining-room watching the butler lay his spoons and forks on the **table** as ceremoniously as if he who owned **them** was not past all sense of every **pleasure**, even that of possession, which perhaps

is about the last that leaves us, and thinking how strange it was that eating and drinking, and the common concerns of every-day life, must go on just the same let who will be brought to the verge of the grave, or even consigned to its depths.

“He’s been a good landlord, and they’ve always liked him,” he thought. “I know that fellow Prowse has often said there wasn’t another gentleman in the county so easy with the game. Prowse has had his share of shooting at any rate, a great deal more than I’ll let him have, I know, when——If I ain’t as bad as Prowse, every bit, thinking of what I’ll do when I come into my kingdom, and then blaming Prowse for worrying about his lease. Poor old fellow! Poor old boy! I’m a brute, and there’s an end of it. If I could only do anything—anything but just go up there and see his poor white face, and then come down here and moon about, wondering what the end will be.”

Mr. Lawrence Wright was not getting on too well upstairs. The Chastelars, father and son, disliked him, but they were punctiliously courteous, just as they always were to everybody. They were both men who would not have known how to be rude if they had wished, and to have wished such a thing would not have been in the Chastelars' nature. But their civility was freezing, and somehow Mr. Wright was made to feel that his presence was at least unlooked for. They could do nothing for him in the matter. Mr. Craven was incapable of attending to business. The whole matter must rest, and everything of a similar nature, till a change took place. Mr. Brown had nothing to say to him, he was deep in a volume of ethnology. The writer's views did not quite agree with his own; and Mr. Brown's own views were not exactly those which are usually taught in well-managed Sunday-schools of the ordinary type. Mr. Brown believed in half a dozen progenitors

of the human race, the writer he was reading went in for twice that number, and Mr. Brown admired him accordingly. He had been broaching this theory to Mr. Chastelar just before Launcelot came in, and it was an unexpected pleasure falling in with this book, which Percy, misled by its title, had ordered by mistake from the subscription library of Stretton. There was a talk a little time afterwards of burning the book, but economy carried the day, and the committee simply ordered it to be sold at half price. Mr. Chastelar did not half understand him; he was as sound in his religious views as in everything else; believed, or thought he did, everything that fifty years ago he had been taught to believe; and, as a matter of courtesy to the established faith, took all upon trust that he did not quite comprehend. He was not at all scientific, consequently half the terms Mr. Brown used were unintelligible to him, so that, as I have said, he was rather bored,

instead of being very much shocked, which he certainly would have been if Mr Brown's meaning had been a little clearer. But the latter was very happy in his new discovery; even the Rector's illness and his own disappointment two days ago, when Miss Ruddfield had for the last time said him nay, were for a time forgotten till the sound of that lady's name, uttered not in the most respectful tone by Mr. Lawrence Wright, struck on his ear, and half closing the book, but keeping his finger in the page, he prepared, if need be, to take his share in the conversation.

"I think the lady in question knows a little more of that matter than she chose to admit to-day. It is a strange thing, to say the least, that Mr. Gerald Crane should have disappeared so opportunely. He might have been a witness too many," said Mr. Wright.

"I should have imagined it impossible for anyone to believe that a lady in Miss Rudd-

field's position could have anything to do with the murderer of her servant but to bring him to justice as soon as might be," said Mr. Chastelar; and somehow the impression conveyed to his hearers was that Mr. Chastelar held it incumbent on him to defend Miss Ruddfield less because his inclination prompted him, than from the fact that she was indirectly connected with his family. A Chastelar should not be lightly spoken of by the common herd, among whom he most assuredly reckoned Mr. Wright and others of a similar standing, neither should anyone into whose veins one drop of the Chastelar blood ran. *Bon sang ne peut mentir*. Well, unhappily, *bon sang* does do so now and then; but at any rate it should not be lightly aspersed by those whose blood was anything but good. Launcelot kept silence. Mr. Brown felt himself tingling all over, and that very same sensation in his right foot, which had once prompted him to behave in so unclerical a manner

towards Mr. Frederick Craven, came there again.

"That's just it; Miss Ruddfield's position is exceptional. One may surely allow to a woman of genius some slight eccentricity, a little indulgence when in questionable circumstances. I think, Mr. Launcelot Chastelar, you and I have seen her under them before now," said Mr. Wright.

"I am at a loss to understand what you mean," was the answer; but he *did* understand him for all that. He was referring to that scene by the stile, when Christine had stood intently talking to one whom he now knew to be Frederick Craven. He would not judge her too severely then. Could he be so very a fool as not to judge her severely now? Year after year had gone on, and her life had been one continuous lie. The homely tragedy of the last few days gave it an element of horror which it had wanted before. Something she had to screen connected with that, and the man before him



guessed it as well as himself. To think that he should have to share with him any secret connected with Christine Ruddfield!

“Miss Ruddfield likes living a romance as well as writing one. If the romance that is lived is rather of the sensational kind, that at least is only in keeping with what one may expect from lady writers. And after all, why should one wonder so much at Mr. Gerald Crane’s disappearance from the stage? It seems to me that all along people have very good-naturedly taken his appearance there quite as a matter of course. Miss Ruddfield is capable at times of preserving a very prudent reticence.”

The look and the tone which accompanied the words were intolerable to Launcelot Chastelar, and yet he hardly dared resent them. Was not the man before him right? First and last, had not Christine so acted that he had a right to asperse her as he did? Given that she was a wife, could she, who had wedded Frederick Craven knowing

what he was, kept his wretched secret all these years, brought up his child—and hers, as he believed—and told lie upon lie to account for her doing so, be any better than the woman of whom all men think that they may speak lightly, and keep as far apart from their wives and daughters as may be. What right had he to protect her name? What right to blame the man before him for speaking as he did? And yet this woman was once to have been his wife, to have borne his name—this woman of whom the man before him was speaking: so that if indeed she had been worth defending, he would have been justified in doing it by felling her traducer to the ground. What had he done that such humiliation should be brought upon him? He felt for himself far more than for her. That he should ever have loved a woman of whom any man could speak as Lawrence Wright was doing now! He felt as if he could never forgive her—not that she had lowered herself, but that in his own eyes she had lowered him.

Mr. Chastelar broke in, saying in his thin, weak, but still high-bred voice, "I think we have satisfied you, Mr. Wright, that we can do nothing in this matter. If you will look in at the office in a few days, we shall be happy to let you know how our client is progressing."

"Thanks. Uncommonly awkward, his falling ill just now, isn't it? But we were talking of Miss Ruddfield."

"*You* were, sir," said Mr. Chastelar, with an icy gravity; "I was not aware that my son or I was discussing the lady in question."

"Weren't you? Ah! I beg Mr. Launcelot Chastelar's pardon—possibly it is still a delicate subject for him, or else he might have helped me in my speculations as to Miss Ruddfield's conduct, or rather manner, at the inquest; it was only manner; still, when a lady has once stepped aside from the paths that her sex find it safest to tread in——"

"I deny that in any one way Miss Rudd-

field has ever swerved from those paths," cried Mr. Brown, with a vehemence that astonished everyone present; himself, as much as anybody, when he had time to think of it. "How two gentlemen can sit and hear a lady whom they have known from her childhood upwards, thus aspersed, is a matter of astonishment to me. Mr. Launcelot Chastelar, I had a better opinion of you."

"Possibly Mr. Wright knows how much importance every one attaches to his words," said Mr. Launcelot Chastelar; "but I think it would have been in better taste, to say the least, to have left Miss Ruddfield's name unspoken."

"In better taste! What has taste got to do with it?" said Mr. Brown. "Mr. Wright, hearing you to-day, and looking on you now, I can account for a certain passage in my life that has sometimes in the retrospect filled me with astonishment and a little annoyance that I acted as I did. I don't feel at all astonished now, or annoyed either.

The passage to which I refer is this: one evening, many years ago, I met Miss Ruddfield, and found that the late Mr. Frederick Craven, of whom perhaps you may have heard, was following her and pestering her with unwelcome attentions. In fact, he was rude, decidedly rude, and I being a young man then, and with perhaps not so much regard to the clerical character as I should have evinced, inflicted summary chastisement on him. In fact, I kicked him, sir—I kicked him into a ditch by the side of the path, and which unfortunately for him was of the muddiest. Since then I've sometimes had my doubts as to the propriety of my conduct, and thought that if I were placed in similar circumstances again I should not be likely to repeat it. I am convinced now that I should. I am certain that if I had been a clergyman ten times over I ought to have done just what I did. I've been very near doing it over again within the last few minutes, only I thought that while two gentlemen so nearly connected

with the lady spoken of were present, the honour of her defence should hardly rest with me."

Mr. Wright looked uncomfortable. As to Mr. Brown, he had never been so angry in his life. That these two Chastelars, father and son, should stand there and hear their kinswoman so spoken of was almost insufferable.

It was a relief to all when the butler opened the door and announced that lunch was ready. Mr. Chastelar turned to Mr. Wright and wished him good morning, with a courtesy that was almost petrifying. There was nothing for him but to go, which he did, leaving the room at the same instant as Mr. Chastelar, and the Curate and Launcelot Chastelar were alone.

"This was hardly what I should have expected of you," said the former. "As Miss Ruddfield's kinsman, you should have stopped the venomous mouth of that little reptile."

"Was it worth while to do it?" asked the other gravely; "and was he altogether wrong in what he said? Has Miss Ruddfield so

borne herself that we are entitled to condemn anyone for condemning her."

He spoke bitterly and painfully, forgetting that of much of which he accused Christine the man before him knew nothing ; but it would have been all the same if he had. Had he been present on that miserable day when Christine had shrunk shame-stricken and humbled from before the eyes of her ancient lover, he would have still believed in her as he did now, have still looked on her as highest, proudest, purest, amongst women; as one upon whose garb, let what mire might be flung, none should rest; as holding her own high path secure and calm, let who would seek to turn her from it ; and have spoken as he did now.

"I should never have thought to have heard this from you—nay, it seems as if it could hardly be yourself who spoke. I don't know what you may have heard ; there may be other foul tongues in the world than that which has just ceased hissing here, but if, to use a very common phrase, an angel from

heaven had come down and told me as truth what you hinted against Miss Ruddfield, I should have told that angel he was speaking falsely. You may misjudge Miss Ruddfield, because you cannot understand her; I am ready to make allowances for you there, though it is hard to do so. I pity you, just as I should a man struck blind, who said the stars had left off shining. Thank God, they shine for me! Thank God, I have still my faith in this one woman so intact that in honouring her I feel I honour all womankind beside."

As he spoke, the short thick-set homely figure dilated with a dignity new and strange to it; the eyes lit up, and over the whole face and bearing came the glow and the light born of a great faith. It was a great faith, though it was but in a woman. It was a faith that had become part of his life, without which existence would not have been bearable. A faith as real, as vital and intense, as any for which a martyr ever perished, or a saint lived. Looking on him, Launcelot



Chastelar felt himself rebuked: moved, too, as all great faith does move the lookers on, almost to share it. He saw something, too, that he had never seen before. This man loved Christine, and looking on his love what a poor, light, unworthy thing his own appeared. He felt humbled and ashamed. Christine was loved as he had never loved her; believed in as he had never believed in her. Through good report and evil, through trouble and trial, through rough paths and smooth, this man would keep to her. Could she be what he had judged her if she could inspire such a faith and such a love? a love how infinitely more loyal and unselfish than his own!

He moved towards the door. Anything to break away from this embarrassing silence.

"Won't you come?" he said, "I expect Mr. Percy Craven is awaiting you."

"Thank you, no," was the answer, "I'll go at once, and perhaps I have no right to be angry with you for a blindness that

you cannot help, but I should not like just now to sit down and break bread with you. Perhaps this is not quite right on my part ; one ought not to be so angry with anyone, but it will pass, I know it will pass, and I shall be able to meet you again almost as before ; but just now I would rather let you go your way and go mine."

## CHAPTER XI.

### FATHER AND SON.

SIMON FLINT was in his grave, having been carried there with the verdict of wilful murder against some person unknown recorded against him who had sent him there. So much Gerald had learnt from the local paper which Miss Ruddfield had forwarded to him, and now, as he sat in his lodgings, he was reading a long epistle she had sent him—reading very anxiously more than once, and at last rising, he laid it down and paced hastily up and down the small apartment.

“So, after all, I am respectable. That is to say, though I’ve the biggest scamp in the kingdom for my father, I am what they

call well born and well connected—undeniably so, on both sides of the house. And to think of that poor, pale, faded Miss Alethea being my mamma! When I think of her, and above all when I think of Aunt Christine, I feel as if it would give me the greatest pleasure in life to thrash my own father. The thorough-going, out-and-out villain! There's no help for it. I always did feel that the less I knew about those by whose instrumentality I was ushered into the world the better, but I never expected anything so bad as this. I don't know that I've a right to say that, though: if only Aunt Christine had been my mother, that would have gone a long way to have made up for all. As it is, for whatever good I may have in me I suppose I must thank her; well, it's something not to find that I drew my first breath in the arms of any like the wretched creatures I have sometimes looked at, and wondered if my mother was like one of them. I am not nobody's boy!

no, not by any means; a gentleman of long descent and heir to a considerable property. Good heavens! how the wheel of life goes round. If only—if only!”—his face grew dark, and he clutched his head nervously—“I could forget what I had seen the other night, or who was the chief actor in it! If it were not for that blackleg, cheat, liar as this rascal seems to be, even double-dyed villain as he has proved himself to Aunt Christine, I might behave with tolerable decency; but as it is—oh Lord! what will be the end of it all?”

He shuddered as he spoke. That one awful night had left a memory which nothing could efface. Between the man he was told to look upon as a father, and himself, rose the ghastly image of Simon Flint. All other sins, all other transgressions against the rights of others, paled before that. Everything might have been obliterated but the one indelible stain of blood. Gerald was not imaginative—he was

hard and prosaic for a young man ; he said sometimes of himself that his early training had stamped youth out of him before he had known what youth was ; but still—still there arose before him the old servant stricken down in the defence of home, dying even on the hearth he had struggled to defend ; and the hand which had stricken him, because balked in its felonious intent, was red with blood for evermore, and how should he take it even if it were ten times his father's ?

“Aunt Christine did what was best—*as she always does.* Was there ever another like her in the world, in sending me here out of the way ; I should have broken down if they had examined me, and the whole thing would have come out. The fellow deserves to hang ten times over. All the fatherhood in the world needn't shut one's eyes to that fact ; but it would hardly be for me to pull the rope that hangs him. And to think of this double-dyed villain, with the stain of blood on his hand, stepping into

the Grange and ousting poor Percy. There's the worst of it! I oust him too: I am this precious rascal's inevitable heir. Lord forgive me for speaking so of my own father! and poor Percy is nowhere—I can do nothing for him while the fellow lives. When he is gone, it may be too late for me to be of much real service. And what will he do—poor Percy, brought up always to pleasant paths and smooth ways—now that things will be anything but smooth and pleasant to him? I'd have him here and we'd plod along together, but he has not work enough in him for the bar—indeed, I don't think Percy has much work in him at all. He's the sweetest temper in the world, or he'd never forgive me for stepping into his shoes; and as it is I shall feel ashamed to look him in the face. I knew that of necessity I must have a scoundrel for my father, but that it should be just this one particular scoundrel seems doubly aggravating. Why couldn't he have died when

he was supposed to do, instead of turning up as he has done for the express purpose, as it seems, of setting Percy and me at odds?"

Gerald certainly was not dutiful, but it must be borne in mind that whenever he had thought of his parentage it had always seemed to him that the less he knew of it the better. What could he be, springing up as he had done out of the mire and filth of a great city, but the child of those inured to sin, and to whom sin had become second nature? Sometimes he had shuddered when he had thought of what his mother might be, and therefore to find in her a good pure woman, however weak and faded, was something to be thankful for. But there was nothing to call up filial reverence in the fact of Frederick Craven—outlaw, scamp, and homicide—standing in the relation of father to him. Had he been a different person altogether Gerald would have scrutinized him closely, and weighed



his claims to affection and respect carefully enough before he yielded either. As it was, it can hardly be wondered at if the instinctive yearnings which are generally supposed to spring up between such near relatives as a matter of course, the intense delight at finding a father just because he is a father, were utterly wanting on Gerald's part. On the whole, his predominant feelings were pity for Percy and aversion for his new-found relative. As to the material advantages accruing to himself, he was not disposed to reflect upon them with very great satisfaction. He had always felt that he should make his way. It would suit him a great deal better to make it by sheer hard work and talent than to lead the careless, pleasant life for which Percy seemed so adapted. The good things that wealth gives he did not care for. He should have them by the time he did. He would just as soon, while young at least, live in a first floor or a small house,

and as to Rosalind, if she cared for him she would be very well content to live so too. And he would value any position he won for himself infinitely more than the one he was likely to inherit. He should think a great deal more of being Queen's Counsel, and by and by Judge, than of ranking with the county gentry of Eastshire. On one only point he could look upon his social elevation with satisfaction. It would make matters easier with the Chastelars. "*He's* a sensible fellow, but like a great many men he's led by his wife. She being a fool doesn't prevent that. It never does, I think; as far as women are concerned the fools have the best of it. And she might not just have liked my being sprung as it were from the gutter. There's the old man too. I was always a little uneasy about him. Well, this will make everything right now. I've got a father, and even if he is the biggest blackguard in the county, these good people will forget all about that in the fact of his being one of the Cravens.

What a deal of humbug there is in the world, to be sure! But just now, as far as that blessed little Rosalind is concerned, humbug seems likely to serve my turn, which after all is the only comfort to be had out of the matter."

He sat down and took a book. Generally Gerald had sufficient self-command over his powers to concentrate them upon any specific object, however tempted his thoughts might be to wander. If he had any special subject to study, any particular point to master, even the image of Rosalind, in all her witcheries, did not suffice to turn him from it. But to-day reading was out of the question—a thousand visions, hopes, and ideas, were chasing one another through his mind; and at last he flung the book impetuously from him with, "It's no use! I must take holiday for to-day. I'm the most thorough-going piece of selfishness that ever breathed. With that poor old Rector dying—and he always was a good fellow; with such a downfall as this for that unlucky Percy—with the memory of that

horrible night, and poor Simon Flint before me—I'm thinking of my own happiness—of wooing and wedding, and having the brightest little face in the world to look at whenever I raise my eyes from my book. I don't deserve to have it; I'm a fool and a brute and a pig. And here comes a visitor: I wonder who on earth has taken the trouble of calling on me!"

The maid of all work belonging to his lodgings brought up a card, and taking it Gerald read "Mr. Frederick Craven." It was many a year since such a card had been seen: many a year since the owner of that name had dared to wear it. His doing so now was a significant fact of his assurance of his safety. "The gentleman said he thought you would see him if you saw this," said the girl, "and he's waiting below."

"Oh, I'll see him! Show him up here at once," said Gerald. "Now I wonder," he thought, "how that fellow thinks I shall receive him. Considering how we last

parted, I should say his coming here is about the coolest thing I've known for one while. Does he expect me to fall on my knees and ask for his blessing? Hang it! a pretty thing to jest at! But if I didn't jest I feel as if I should shed tears of blood."

Mr. Frederick Craven came in, well dressed, clean shaven, all but a small and carefully trimmed moustache on his upper lip. He was in mourning, too; the suit was ready made, but it fitted him very fairly, and round his hat was a deep crape band. He took the chair to which Gerald pointed, and, slightly bowing, made no offer of his hand. Having pointed to the chair, Gerald placed both his behind his back, the fingers twitching each other a little more nervously than he would have cared that the other should see. That was settled. At least he had been spared the pain of refusing the hand which he had half thought his father might have held out to him.

His father! It was very difficult to realize

it, looking on the man before him. Sprung from a class so different to what Gerald had expected his parents must belong, and yet as vile, as crime-stained, as any felon who had ever plundered for daily bread, or lived a life of crime because none other had been open to him. There were few traces of his former good looks remaining; and in the puffed face, the lines under the eyes and round the mouth, the sunken eyes themselves, there were traces of wear and tear that were likely to have made sad havoc of the constitution. But still he looked fairly respectable, and almost gentlemanly; the worst thing about him to appearance was the furtive outlook of the eyes. Gerald felt that he was watching him, watching him too with just a little fear, and yet with a self-complacent cunning, as if he felt that, whatever cause he might otherwise have for dread, he had taken such precautions as would render any serious anxiety on his part unnecessary. He seemed, too, to be

half hoping, half expecting that Gerald might speak first, and Gerald on his part was determined that he should be disappointed.

Presently, Mr. Frederick Craven began :  
“You are possibly surprised at seeing me here ; though I make no doubt but that, by this time, Miss Ruddfield has acquainted you with the relations in which we stand together.”

“She has told me of my ill fortune in that respect. You'll excuse the seeming rudeness, but remembering the circumstances under which we last parted, and that a word of mine would consign you to a prison—possibly to the gallows—you can hardly wonder that I don't feel very much elated by the news I have received.”

“Do you think it would be quite advisable, even for yourself, to speak that word ? Granted that I were guilty in intention, which I deny—my sole object being to free myself from the importunate old fool who was contending with me—still, granted that guilt and the possibility of proving it, how would you stand if found

the son of a convicted felon, whose lands would revert to the Crown, whose name would be a ban on all who bore it? If you are wise you'll abstain from threatening me. You can't injure me without hurting yourself; we are in the same boat, unwilling companions possibly, but as fate has given me you for a son, and you me for a father, why the sooner you arrive at least at the conclusion that we must sink or swim together the better."

"Is that what you came to say? You might have spared yourself the telling. I don't pretend—it would be sheer folly to do so—to any instinctive affection for such a father as you have shown yourself, still less to any great amount of filial reverence. You flung me from you to sink or swim in the gutter as I might; to die of starvation and cold, or more mercifully be run over by carriage wheels which might have chanced to be your own; or to prove myself indeed your son by developing into a full-grown burglar and murderer. Some caprice, or possibly the



wish to strengthen your hold over Miss Ruddfield, induced you, when chance threw me in your way, to claim me as your son. I don't owe you much for that, and for the bare fact of my existence certainly nothing. Still, standing as we do to each other, the common instincts of nature forbid that I should reverse the part of Brutus, and send you to the gallows, however well deserved. You are safe for me ; quite as safe as if my own interests were not affected one hair's-breadth by the matter ; but there is an end—I have given you this assurance of your safety ; and for the rest of our respective lives the less we see of each other the better."

"You are tolerably independent. Perhaps you are not aware of the event which took place early this morning ? Mr. Craven died, and the gentleman whom I employed to watch my interests, and whom most probably I shall employ as my solicitor—I hate those Chastelars—Mr. Wright, telegraphed the news to me. You see I have lost no time in

equipping myself suitably as heir and chief mourner, and I am now going down to take possession. I don't expect any one will venture to dispute my identity, but I thought at the same time of taking you with me, and introducing you as the future master of the Hall—with your old friend Percy Craven deposed.

He watched the other narrowly while speaking. He was nervously anxious to take him with him, to introduce him as his son, and by so doing strengthen his position—making it impossible for the other ever to breathe a word of what he had seen that fatal night. It was just a bribe for silence, and Gerald received it as such.

“I shall not go with you,” he said. “Whatever construction people may put upon the matter, I can't help it. They won't hit just the right one, and if they say it is because as Christine Ruddfield's adopted son I have been brought up in such a way that you and I can have no part or lot in common, they'll

be pretty near it. To be plain, it's best to begin as I mean to go on, and I'll have nothing to do with you. I can pretty well keep myself as it is, without troubling Miss Ruddfield. If I get on as I am now doing in reporting, I shan't need to draw upon her resources much longer. I don't mean to draw upon yours. If I don't get on, I'll raise the money upon post-obits, but I won't come to you for it. I'm quite lawyer enough to see my own position, and to make the best of it. I'll owe nothing to you. I'll never enter under your roof, break bread with you, or sit at your table ; I can't help your being my father, but I could help it, if, having been brought up with the notions of an honest man, I chose not to abide by them. If you wanted a son of your own stamp, you should have flung me back to the gutter from which the Ruddfields rescued me. As it is, in one or two things you see I take after their side of the house. But there's something more. You have broken the life of one of those two women

—made her old and feeble, decayed in mind and body years before her time. Over the life of the other you have cast a blight and a shadow, wrung her hard earnings from her, lived on the fruits of her over-tasked brain, always using the threat that at one time or another, unless your greed was supplied, you would take her poor feeble sister from her. It is possible that, out of that sheer devilish cruelty which I believe to be an inherent part of your nature, you may even now try to exert your legal rights over that unhappy lady who has the misfortune to be your wife. Do it if you dare. I am her son as well as yours, and I constitute myself now her guardian. You shall make her such allowance as Miss Ruddfield thinks right and proper, and you shall never molest her by your presence, or expect her to share your home. She has been virtually a widow all these years; to all intents she shall be a widow still. If at any time you attempt to resume the detestable tyranny which you

have exercised over these unhappy ladies, no consideration as to any ties existing between us, no thought of the unnatural position in which I shall be placed, of the shock to all instinctive prejudices that it would be, shall cause me to keep peace longer. I'll hand you over to the police, let what will come of it. For the rest of their days my mother and the woman who has been so much more to me than mother, shall have peace as far as you at least are concerned. Take good heed to your ways, Mr. Craven, for by the Lord above us if it comes to that, I shall remember nothing but my mother when I turn you over to the hangman."

The crafty eyes that had been watching him burned with a malignant, vengeful fire as Gerald spoke, and there came a look into them such as one might fancy a wild beast had that found itself trapped through its own incautiousness. An impotent spite; an anger almost as much against itself as against

the one who had trepanned it ; and then the passionate wish to escape at all hazards, like a wild beast again ; beating its head against the bars, ready to break away, even if it perishes in so doing.

“ You talk very securely,” he said fiercely. “ You are ready enough with your post-obits and your threats of exposure—you, whom I have raised to what you are by a breath—you, whom simply by withholding that breath, by refusing to acknowledge you as my son, I could send back to your original nothingness. What is there to hinder me doing it ? Or rather, what is there to induce me to acknowledge you not merely as my son, but as my heir ? To say that there was any valid marriage between myself and Miss Ruddfield ; to own you indeed after a fashion, as the offspring of my mistress, but never of my wife ? ”

Gerald's right hand by this time had been withdrawn from behind his back ; it was clenched tightly together. The creature before

him little knew what an instinctive longing those thin wiry fingers had to clutch his throat. It would have been a murderous grasp if they had, for Gerald was fairly roused, the darker stormier part of his nature at least, and it was hard for him to keep the mastery over himself as he did, and content himself with answering, "Don't talk like that again. You won't find it safe, especially at this height from the ground: I never felt so tempted in my life to do anything as I am at this present moment to throw you out of that window. I won't attempt to answer your insinuations further than by the remark that such a thing is simply impossible. Christine Ruddfield's sister could not have stooped to the infamy to which you allude unless some deception had been practised on her of so vile a nature that, she being as she is my mother, I should be justified in throttling you were you ten times my father. I don't believe one bit of the audacious lie you have dared to hint, and I can only reply it

is a very good thing for you that I don't. Now I'd advise you to go downstairs. We've seen enough of each other, and we understand each other perfectly well. You'll remember my warning as to my mother and her sister. Look to yourself, for by the heaven above, if you forget it, I'll keep my word, even if the results as regards you are the very worst your craven conscience might lead you to fear."



## CHAPTER XII.

### IN THE TWILIGHT.

MR. CRAVEN was buried with all due honours, and instead of the handsome boy whom everybody in Stretton knew, and whose majority had been so lately kept, and who had bade fair to be the most popular landowner in that part of the kingdom, Frederick Craven, old and worn before his time, with the odour of an evil name around him, with many bad deeds of his own to answer for, and with a great many more credited to him, stepped into the mastership of the Grange. There was no disputing his right to do so; his identity was unquestionable, so also was the fact

that he was the next heir to the entail. The Chastelars withdrew from the management of his affairs, and Mr. Lawrence Wright undertook them. The county gentry did not call, and were slow of recognizing him in any way. They were inclined to be merciful to the failings of black sheep of their own order, but Mr. Frederick's sins had been of such an utter blackness that it was impossible to condone them. Whether he felt the seclusion to which he was condemned or not, no one could tell. He lived quietly, and without any such flagrant violations of propriety as had been expected of him. He smoked a great deal, read a vast number of French novels, played billiards whenever Mr. Wright could spare time to come over to the Hall for the purpose, looked pretty sharply after his accounts, and nothing worse on the whole could be said of him than that he drank rather more champagne than gentlemen, when alone, are in the habit of doing.

On the whole, people were disappointed. They had expected great things in the way of evil from Mr. Frederick Craven, and he had not fulfilled them. They had thought that his iniquities would have been a standing dish of horror, with which to regale themselves; and lo! he was going on as smoothly and almost as decorously as any middle-aged squire of them all. It was rather annoying, to say the least. They had expected better or worse things of him, and he was actually doing nothing to enliven the tedium of the town. They could not go on talking over his past story for ever, and he seemed determined not to give them a succession of similar ones. They didn't put it in words, but still the good people felt themselves just a little ill-used. Every one pitied Percy Craven. The downfall had been so thorough, and, owing to the complete prostration of his kinsman, no provision had been made for him. If Gerald had come down and taken the position of heir

apparent which Percy had so recently held, his unpopularity would for a time at least have been certain. As it was, his staying away from the Hall at this juncture was perhaps the best thing he could do for his own future standing. It set him apart from his father—placed him at once in a position, if not exactly antagonistic, at least sufficiently so to induce people to consider him as holding aloof from the head of his house with a quiet distaste for his practices which, in their relative positions, was all that could be expected of him.

At North End House things went on much as they had done before, to all outward appearance. Miss Alethea kept her name still, and the servants and her friends greeted her as before by the old familiar designation. Mr. Frederick Craven had had the grace to offer, through his solicitor, some addition to his wife's income; possibly the threat which Gerald had held out had had something to do with that; but the offer had been rejected.

They would take nothing from his hands ; connect themselves with him in no way, so after a while it was perfectly understood that, although, in her youth, Miss Alethea had committed the folly of becoming Mr. Frederick Craven's wife without the knowledge of her family, to recognize him now as her husband—even to bear his name—would be something too needlessly painful for her to undergo.

They had taken Percy in at North End House. Launcelot Chastelar would have received him, but his wife said no. She had gathered quite enough from Rosalind's half confessions as to what had taken place on the day of the fête to learn that such a proceeding would not be advisable. There was some excuse made to her husband, and just then Christine Ruddfield stepping in, the young man took up his quarters with her. Whatever pretensions he might have made to his daughter's hand, Mr. Launcelot Chastelar knew nothing of them. He was a clever man, and his wife was not at all a clever

woman, but she had an infinite amount of cunning, and as he had not a particle he was on most points more easily managed than he ever imagined himself to be.

Just now, he was a little more troubled about his own old love affair than, considering his age and profession, might have been expected of him. He ought to have outlived that old romance ; his wife always credited him with having done so. But we don't outgrow everything ; we are sometimes younger than our years ; and Launcelot Chastelar, at forty-five, had not yet outlived all the influences of that early dream. He had wronged Christine to some extent. He was a man, and yet he had the grace to own that. At least, too, she herself had never stooped to receive Frederick Craven's love. He felt as proud of her when he thought of that, as if he had still a right to be proud of her in anything. She had not left him, to feast on garbage. Perhaps that was his thought, though he would scarcely have expressed

so brusquely. But why had she left him at all? As he asked himself that, the memory of his old wrong rose up keenly within him. Looking on that well-bred pattern gentlewoman, his wife, the wrong did not feel one whit the less keen. She had been false to him after all, even though the vileness of being false for Frederick Craven's sake had been spared her.

If North End House had gained an inmate in Percy Craven, it had lost one in Claude Ruddfield. Her father had returned to London now, and Gibbs and she must go together to keep house for him. Claude had a very lively affection for her father, but he had been away eight years, during all which time Miss Ruddfield had been twining herself closer and closer round her niece's heart. Then the girl had reasons of her own for shrinking from visiting London. Gerald was there, he would be always coming to them, and how should she bear it—his constant sight, his constant presence—and to know that

every thought and hope was given to another? That was how she reasoned, as most young ladies in her position would, whereas Gerald had a great many hopes and thoughts with which Miss Rosalind Chastelar had nothing whatever to do. But he would be coming; always in and out, speaking of Rosalind, and expecting her to speak too, and how should she bear it? There was no hiding the fact from herself; she liked Gerald after a very different fashion to the liking of earlier years; it would have been the greatest joy of all her life, if he had spoken such words to her as those of which Rosalind Chastelar thought so lightly, and it would be torture and pain almost unendurable to hear him picturing the future as he would picture it—dwelling on the life he was to lead with Rosalind, the home they were to share, the long vista of the path they were to tread together. "She will know her own mind now," thought Claude with a little bitterness; "it will be quite clear to her that she has all along liked



Gerald very much the better of the two, and he will never know the difference."

But she must go to London, that was clear. Mr. Edgar Ruddfield required some one to take care of him besides Gibbs. Even Aunt Christine admitted that necessity. It would be very hard to give Claude up—Claude whom she had so folded to her heart, as if she had been daughter instead of niece, but it must be done. Something of this she said the last evening before Claude's departure, as the two sat alone in the large old-fashioned drawing-room, neither working nor reading; everything done; everything packed up, and just so many hours to get through before the inevitable parting came. It was twilight, and warm for October, so that the windows were still open, and the perfume of the clematis stole through them. The lamp had not yet been brought in, so that the two could not see each other's faces, which Christine was inclined to think was just as well if her own showed half the sadness that it felt. Miss Alethea was

being put to bed by Gibbs for the last time. She had made as pitiful a moan about parting with her as if her loss were as great as her sister's in losing Claude, but all Miss Alethea's sensations now were material. She liked Gibbs because she understood her, because nobody made her arrowroot like her, or dressed and undressed her so easily. Gibbs scolded everyone else, but she never scolded Miss Alethea. "It would have been a wastin' o' words," she said, "drivin' nails in where there was nothin' for 'em to take hold on." But she petted and spoiled her just as she would a sick child, and Miss Alethea felt herself very ill-used in the prospect of being deprived of such petting and spoiling.

Percy was out, brooding over his own troubles, poor fellow! borne down by a sudden consciousness of his own helplessness and insignificance. Since the reversal of their fortunes, he had had one letter from Gerald, of which more by and by, which perhaps had done him as much good as any one thing. But it

was a hard blow notwithstanding, the one which had been dealt him ; and it taxed all his manliness to bear it with due composure. He was glad to take himself out of the way of the women. Their very kindness, their very pity was at times too much for him, and within the last day or two he had received another hurt of which they as yet knew nothing ; but nevertheless just the hurt that Claude had wisely expected would come.

Then in the twilight their hearts seemed drawn together, as hearts are sometimes. Christine had her own troubles, her life had been full of them, but not the less some instinct told her that the girl beside her had been wounded very sorely. There had been a change of late which not all the terrors of the last few weeks could properly account for ; and this had something to do with the deepened tenderness of her tone as she said, " I shall miss you sadly, Claude. You can hardly realize what it will be to stay here and never hear your voice or step. Only you *must*

go, that's the only thing that makes the parting bearable,—the inevitable duty of making your father's home as bright as may be ; I don't say you'll forget me, child, you are not one of those that do forget so easily ; but London will be a new life altogether, and you will find a great deal after a time to fill up your life and your thoughts. Gerald will be coming, too, to see you. I wonder when he will venture down here. Not too soon, with that father of his in the neighbourhood."

"Yes, he will, Aunt Christine," said Claude, braver in the twilight than she would have been if the sun had been shining into the room, resolving too to give her worst thoughts words, and let them take shape and form. "He will come, and you will have to make Rosalind Chastelar very welcome for his sake."

Aunt Christine understood it all now. Something in the girl's tone, though to Claude's own fancy she had spoken as composedly as ever, told her what was wrong.

Here was another vision of her life at an end. She had sometimes pictured these two, Gerald and Claude, going through life together ; felt that she could live her own lost life in their happiness, pictured herself loving their children as she had done themselves. That was all over, and it was very hard to bear, harder too for the pain that she felt Claude at least was feeling. She was angry with Gerald for a moment. That he should be fooled by a mere face, when Claude Ruddfield might have been his for the asking ! Then she pitied him. He will suffer enough for it in time, she felt, and she was not sure but that of the two she was more sorry for him than for Claude. He will repent his mistake the longest, she thought, as she pictured Claude in years to come, heart-whole again, and either the light of some man's home who had eyes to see all that lay beneath that pale quiet face, or else living the life that women who know how to make use of such intelligence as God has given them can do, even

already, without waiting for emancipation or legal assurance of their rights ; and she pictured, too, the other side of the picture—Gerald mated to a frivolous, faded woman (for a close observer could see that even Rosalind Chastelar's very prettiness was of an evanescent kind), a woman who could comprehend him in nothing—who would just have sufficient of the strength born of feebleness to dwarf and cramp his higher nature, but would never make one effort to attain to it. She would ruin him as the bindweed does the plant round which it twines. He would be the merest wreck of what he might have been, if he went on loving her ; and if he did not, if he found what a poor doll it was that he had placed by his hearth, he would grow hard and cold and unsympathetic ; he would live his life without her, but it would be a life in which the heart would have very little to do, and the intellect a great deal. Not at all a good life for man or woman to lead. One way or another, let it be which way it might,

he would be dwarfed and deteriorated by his marriage. She could have groaned as she thought it over. To think that she had brought her boy up for this: that all these years she should not have taught him to distinguish the gold from the tinsel, the true gem from the false. Angry with him ! After all, there was too much cause for pity for her to feel any other emotion just now for him, but at the present Claude wanted something more than pity ; she needed help in her sore trouble, a trouble how much the sorer that not even to her nearest, dearest friend, to the one who had been as a mother to her all these years, could she bring herself to speak of it. She must aid her; she had to bear her burden, but one way or another she must teach her how to bear it.

“ I am very sorry for Gerald,” she said presently ; “ Rosalind is a pretty little thing, but hardly the wife for him. Only Gerald will not find that out till too late. In such matters men never have their eyes couched till the operation is useless.” She believed what she

said, and it would be useless to hold out hope ; temporizing in this matter would be only torture. Let Claude look her sorrow in the face and bear it. Only the burden might be a little lightened for her.

“ Poor Gerald,” she went on, “ he is much more to be pitied than he dreams of ; if things are so, you won’t see so much of him after all. But you will see a great deal of other people ; some of them very clever ones. Yours will be just the life, Claude, that when I was a girl I pictured for myself as the most enviable a woman could have : to be surrounded by producers and creators, and have the pleasure of sympathizing with and appreciating all the works with which they enrich the world without herself caring to add anything to the general stock I have perforce added my mite, such as it is, but I would rather have been a simple looker-on—watched the picture from the time it was first stretched on the easel, known of the book before it was in the publisher’s hands. I wasn’t to have this life—



it has come to you, and with it, to give that strength and stamina to a life without which it is hardly worth the rising up and lying down, comes a duty clearly marked out to be performed. You must take great care of your father, Claude. I don't like the tone of his letters. I don't like his handwriting. I don't like his feeling too unnerved to come down as yet to see us. I doubt whether Italy has done so much for him, after all. You will find he wants a great deal of care, a great deal of thought, Claude; I shall be sorely grieved to lose you, my child, but I shall feel all the happier on my brother's account."

"Aunt Christine," said Claude impetuously, "I think if you could put yourself out of the world altogether, you'd be content to do it, if only any one else could be helped by it. Do you ever think of yourself at all?"

"Thank God, child, I grew out of that long ago. I should have died else—died, if just my own trouble, my own sorrow, was all that I had had to think of. I have been compelled to put

aside my own sufferings because there were others to be cared for, and they were weak and must be aided, feeble and unable to stand alone. You may guess a little at what my past has been ; some day, when I am better able, I will tell you all the dreary story, how my burden first fell on me, and instead of crying out that I could not bear it, that too much was laid on me for any mortal strength, I had to fit it to my shoulders as best I might, because the needs of others were so imperative, I had no time to think of my own. Child, what I have gone through ! If I had ever stopped to pity myself, how should I have done it. All the pity that I had to spare was needed for others. Claude, let a woman suffer as she may, next to faith in the Unseen, in the One Great Beneficence that overruleth all things for the best, there is no support in grief, no antidote to sorrow, like the self-forgetfulness which bids her think less of her own load than how she shall lighten that of others.

## CHAPTER XIII.

### GERALD'S VISITOR.

CLAUDE was in London, making good use of her aunt's counsels, for indeed they were needed. Mr. Edgar Ruddfield was very much in want of some one to look after him. Life in Italy had not been altogether beneficial to him. He had grown weaker, every way—more absorbed in his art, more unable to work out his conceptions. He wanted almost as much watching, restraining, and directing as a child, and all this to be done with a tact and finesse that would not have been needed in the case of any child. Claude had enough to do, without brooding over

her own trouble. The little house in the once quiet semi-rural lane was again theirs. It had been let all these years, and now, the tenant's lease having run out, Mr. Edgar Ruddfield had resumed possession of a place which at first his wife's memory had made distasteful to him. He had missed her so sorely, and he had never once asked himself whether the sense of her loss was not rather the want of an occupation, the strange new sense of a freedom with which he hardly knew what to do, than the real deep grief springing from the loss of an object which had fully deserved all the affection given it.

He had lost an incubus, but he hardly knew how to walk straight without it, and he had never yet found that it was only an incubus after all.

However, the little house was occupied again. There was still the garden and the old well-remembered lilacs and laburnums, whose purple and gold had once so delighted

Claude's eyes; the stiff little beds with their borders of thrift and daisies, the tiny lawn with the old acacia under which Claude had sat and read fairy tales, or told Gerald stories out of Shakespeare and the Bible. That was all the same, only it seemed closer, smaller, more pent in than before, for London had been busy enough while Edgar Ruddfield had been dreaming his life away in Italy, and Claude growing up at North End House into her sedate young womanhood. Tall, white, stuccoed houses looked down upon the little green oasis, which ten years ago had been so still and secluded, and the whirl of fashionable life was heard even in that once quiet little nook which before had had a stillness as if you had been borne away on fairy wings fifty miles from the smoke and dust of a great city.

Still, it was a pleasant little place to come to, after all. There was greenness and quiet, if they were only comparative.

Gerald began to find his way there very soon. Mr. Edgar Ruddfield was pleased to see him. One of the happiest recollections of his life was that he had withstood Gibbs in the matter of Gerald. What an effort it had cost him to do so at the time! He wondered now at his own boldness; if it were to be done over again he was sure he could not do it. He was every way so much feebler than before. If it had not been for Claude, Gibbs might have ruled as an autocrat indeed in Linden Cottage.

So Gerald came after his work was over. He was studying just as earnestly as if it was not, to all appearance, in the inevitable nature of things that he must succeed to the Hall and its lands. "The present possessor," he said to himself, "is good for another thirty years in all probability, and I don't mean to ask him for a penny while he's there." Therefore he worked quite as hard as before, and was very glad indeed, by way of relaxation, to come and spend the quiet evening hours

in talk with Claude's father, in now and then with Claude herself. Of course he spoke to her of Rosalind—what other subject could be so interesting to him? In the twilight of the early winter before her father—perhaps intending to have a quiet talk with one or two friends who might have dropped in—had left his study, Gerald met her: or he would find her at the Academy, alone with her father, who might have looked in by way of relaxation after a hard day at his easel. Any way, there were plenty of opportunities for Rosalind's praises to be sounded, and for Gerald's hopes and plans for the future to be dwelt upon.

He was in no hurry to go down and resume his wooing. It seemed almost un-  
 seemly, in the midst of all that had taken  
 place. He was about to go when he told  
 Claude; and she, who had been so  
 a bit, now had time to  
 recall that he was  
 at the  
 that

ought to be forgiven him, he would speak at once to Mr. Launcelot Chastelar; generally winding up with, "I suppose that's the right thing to do now, isn't it? When a girl has told you she'll think about it, the next step is to go to her father; what should you say, Claude? She wouldn't say she'd think about it if she didn't mean to have you—not a well brought up girl like Rosalind, at any rate. I hope she doesn't think I've given her too long. I wish I could write, but that seems hardly fair. She must know what's keeping me silent all this time. Or would you mind giving her a hint—just a word or two when you write, you know? You'll bring her back with you after Christmas, won't you? I don't think she has been to London since that time you and I so nearly got run over. I can't give myself long holidays to stay down there; besides, I don't care to be in the neighbourhood of Mr. Craven; the less chance there is of our meeting each other the better; but I could take you both out together,



and we could have a good time of it. You'll manage all that for me, Claude, I know. What a dear little cousin you are! That's the one thing I do feel indebted to Mr. Craven for, the giving me a right to count kin with you and Aunt Christine."

All of which Claude had to hear, as calmly as she could. After a while it was not very difficult to do so. She was beginning to learn her task pretty well by heart. Just the one thing she would have risked life to obtain, life refused to give; the flowers she would have stretched forth her hand to pluck were out of her reach; well, if life had not flowers to give, it had many other things, and it not only gave, but it required far too much of her for her to be content to sit down idly with folded hands crying like a child because the moon would not come down to her. She had plenty to do without crying for the moon.

One evening Gerald went home rather later than usual. They kept early hours at the

cottage—Mr. Edgar Ruddfield got tired before the end of the day ; but to-night he had sat first playing chess and then indulging in reminiscences of his artistic life in Italy which were amusing enough to Gerald. He might have liked better talking to Claude about Rosalind, but he was very ready to talk or hear Mr. Ruddfield talk about other things too, and he stayed on till a warning look from Claude, who saw that her father was overtiring himself, told him to retire. Then he went away, walking briskly to his lodgings, heedless of the cold drizzling rain that was now falling, a chill forerunner of the coming winter. He was in good spirits altogether ; he had had a hard day's work before he went to Linden Cottage, and hard work always put Gerald in excellent temper with himself, and the world around him. It was like a test of his own capabilities, and generally a successful one. The walk was long, from Brompton to the neighbourhood of Queen Square, Bloomsbury, but Gerald disdained even an omnibus

to help him. The muscular exertion seemed a grateful change after the other labours of the day, and he looked fresher than when he started, as his landlady let him in, and he took off his light overcoat.

“Sorry to be so late, Mrs. Grange; I’m afraid I’ve kept you up.” Then he looked at her, and saw that she had something to tell him.

“I don’t know whether I’ve done right, sir, but a gentleman drove up here in a cab some hours back, and asked to see you. He had a portmanteau with him as if he had come from the country. He looked tired, and vexed at finding you out, and I let him stop when he asked; he’s upstairs now. He rang some time ago, and asked me to get him some tea, and I think he’s pretty comfortable.”

“I’ve no doubt of it,” said Gerald, all his good-humour gone in an instant. “Mr. Craven, of course,” was his thought. “I sha’n’t stand this; if he thinks to come here and foist himself upon me, he’ll find himself mistaken. But hang it! what am I to do? I suppose it isn’t

the thing to show one's own father to the door, and if he won't go I can't turn him out; I shall have to go myself. It's a devil of a bore having relations, after all; no, I won't say that, with Aunt Christine and that good little soul of a Claude."

He had opened the door by this time, and, stretched by the fire, in Gerald's own especial easy chair—the one he never indulged in till work was fairly over for the day, and he might lounge over his book or his paper as long as he pleased—reclined the figure of a man: His feet were stretched towards the fire, and by his regular breathing Gerald guessed that he was asleep. At a little distance was his portmanteau; the empty teacup on the table, the book which had dropped from his hand, looked as if after all he had, as Mrs. Grange had said, been pretty comfortable, and Gerald's heart did not expand with the glow of hospitality at the sight.

"Making himself at home, there's no doubt about it. I hope he hasn't taken such a fancy

to my lodgings that he means to make them his London quarters. If he has, I'll go,—and that'll be a confounded bore when Mrs. Grange suits me so well."

He went nearer, not too softly; he had no great respect for the slumbers he was likely to disturb, and as he moved the occupant of the chair awoke, stretched his arms, yawned, and turning towards Gerald, the lamp-light fell on the face of Percy Craven.

Then Gerald went up with outstretched hand. "I'm glad to see you, old fellow; I'm glad that you've come to me just as if nothing of all this had happened."

They shook hands heartily, the supplanted and the supplanter—the heir who had lost his inheritance, and the one who had stepped into it. But there was little feeling of that sort on Percy's side at least—on Gerald's, there was a slight uncomfortable qualm as he said, "You know, old boy, I couldn't help it. You see, a fellow isn't answerable for his own father; and if you lose, I don't gain."

"I never blamed you, Ger. If I had been inclined to do so, that letter of yours would have set all right. And I've come to you now to ask you if you can put me in the way of doing something for myself. I think I've been mooning about long enough, as it is, at Aunt Christine's."

"She wouldn't think so; but you'll stay here to-night? Mrs. Grange will put you up somehow. We'll have these things taken away, and talk matters over together."

Mrs. Grange was able to furnish the needful accommodation. If not, Gerald would have settled the matter by making Percy take his room, and having the sofa for himself. Then they had in water and the best supper Mrs. Grange could furnish at such short notice at that time of night; and afterwards, lighting their cigars, the two young men drew together over Gerald's fire to discuss matters.

"I must do something," said Percy, "it's an inevitable necessity in the present state of affairs, and the one thing that I've been

brought up for, being just to spend five thousand a year, doesn't exactly come in my way. Nobody seems likely to put it there either. I shouldn't mind emigrating, but I haven't the needful to start with, and from the one quarter from whence I might obtain it, it would be impossible for me to take help." As he spoke, there was a slight tremulousness in his voice, and he looked away from Gerald and at the fire. Who was it that had offered him assistance which he was too proud to take? the present possessor of the Hall of course. Gerald could come to no other conclusion.

"You mean Mr. Craven, I suppose?" he said; "I don't see why you shouldn't take a few hundreds from him to set you going. I won't take a stiver, but then you see the case is different. I don't care for him to have any pull over me beyond the bare fact of his being my father; while you need look at the matter simply as a little return on his part of that which he has robbed you of. I don't mince

the matter. I can't help the relationship, you know, but it is perfectly clear that if he had only let the poor old squire know of his existence, he would have taken care to have provided for you in one way or another. As it is, this one's bound to do it. It's quite a pleasant surprise to me to learn that he has sufficient decency to acknowledge the fact. Take whatever he offers you, and go off to Canada or New Zealand. You're just the stuff that first-rate emigrants are made of; you'll make your fortune quite as soon as I shall, old fellow, after all."

"But it was not from Mr. Craven that any offer of assistance came," said Percy, and again there was something almost of shame-faced avoidance in his look; "it was Mr. Launcelot Chastelar who made it."

"Ah! he's a good fellow and a gentleman, and has made a great deal out of your family business; you might have taken it from him; I wonder you didn't."

"I couldn't, Ger! Oh Lord! I have made



such a fool of myself, and yet I don't know whether it's my own doing, either. It's odious to bring up a girl's name, but—but I did think that Rosa—that Miss Chastelar cared for me. I don't know that I've any right to say she'd given me any reason to think so but, at any rate I thought she had before all this came about. Well, I knew, of course, that it must make a difference, but I wouldn't give her up without a word. After all, she was an only child, and if she did care for me there was no knowing what views her father might be brought to take of it. If I could only see her—just ask her whether things were still to go on as I had hoped they would, I should know what to do. But I couldn't get to see her, her mother stuck to her like a bur, and at last I got desperate and wrote, and the mother answered. Mind, I don't say that she was altogether in the wrong ; perhaps I had misunderstood Rosalind. I had very little after all to go upon ; but still I think if Mr. Frederick

Craven had not come to life just when he did, I should have had Mrs. Chastelar on my side, and that Rosalind liked me well enough for her mother's influence to have settled the matter in my favour. Well, she told me that I must have put some wrong construction upon the familiarity with which her daughter, from our early acquaintanceship had been induced to treat me ; that she was but a child, to whom no man of honour would have appealed in the first instance ; that I had taken advantage of Miss Chastelar's inexperience in so unjustifiable a manner, that even if my position had not been affected as it was by Mr. Craven's sudden death, she would still have considered herself justified in refusing to entertain my proposals. As it was, she could only wonder at my temerity in making them.

“That was it, pretty well, in a nice Italian hand, with her monogram at the top—not a blot, not an illegible word. Her hand never faltered at least, while she as good as told me that I was not only poor but a rogue ; and yet

if I were not the penniless creature I am, I think she would have been ready enough to let me talk nonsense to Rosey by the hour without waiting for her father's leave to do so, so long as she was sure that I should ask for it at last."

"Please tell me this, old fellow," said Ger. "Do you think you have any right to blame Miss Chastelar—or—or—any right to think she cares for you?"

"How can I say? You wouldn't have me write myself down a coxcomb. Precious little good her caring would do me now. I've given her to know that I liked her better than any girl in the world, and asked her if she could like me. That's all. I never had an answer. Something interrupted us just in the nick of time, so there is no knowing what my answer might have been. I shall never know now; Rosey Chastelar is gone, just like the old house, and the lands, and everything else that I thought myself born to," he said wearily.

Gerald walked hastily up and down the

room. "I wish, old fellow, I could give them all back to you. If they were mine to-morrow, at any rate we'd go shares in them. But we couldn't go shares in Rosalind Chastelar. There she would be still between us, the one thing that only one or other could have. But at least don't let her divide us. Now, look here, my boy, I like little Rosey too. I'd made up my mind, before I knew that you liked her, to go in and win. You being so much the poorer doesn't make me one whit the richer. I'll never take one penny from the hands of Mr. Craven in his life; still no doubt the fact that I am heir apparent to the Hall will go a long way with the Chastelars, more especially the mother; but—but after what you've told me I don't feel as if I could go in and try, not at least without your leave; it seems altogether too bad to be the son of the fellow who has ousted you out of all your belongings, and then to oust you out of the girl you'd set your heart upon into the bargain. For there's no mistake about one thing.

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If you were at the present moment the master of the Hall, Rosey Chastelar would be turned over to you without the little girl's own wishes being much studied in the matter. I'd never have entered the lists if I'd known you were against me. As things were there'd have been no fighting against such odds: as things are—well, I don't seem as if I *could* go in, though to win Rosey Chastelar has been for years just the wish of my life."

"What a trump you are, Ger! You are to have the best of it every way. Oh, Lord! and so you care for Rosey, too. Go in for her? Why, what else can you do? If you don't have her some one else will who won't deserve her half so well; at any rate she will never be for me. If I thought there was the remotest chance of that, I'd hold by her to the end; but there isn't, there never can be; by this time I know Mrs. Chastelar too well to believe that: and as to Mr. Chastelar, one may be too sure of his taking his wife's view of the matter, for any appeal to him to be of the

slightest use. All I can say is, go in and win, only don't let me know the day the knot's tied. I suppose I must bear it all as best I can ; it's only making things a little harder, that's all, and I'd thought them hard enough already."

Gerald was more than ever ashamed of himself for his own good-fortune. Every way he was to be the better of Percy, every way rob him, as it seemed, of that which had seemed so peculiarly his own. He was almost inclined to arraign Providence for making things so easy to him. It was so hard upon Percy, who had done so little to merit his ill-fortune.

He was not greatly troubled by what he had heard of Rosalind herself. Percy might so easily have misunderstood her. With the fear of her mother before her eyes, she would be almost afraid of saying him no, however far her own inclinations might forbid her saying yes. Poor little soul ! he fancied her fluttered and half frightened by Percy's love-making,

her wish not to pain him mingling with her own dread of her mother's becoming acquainted with the fact that she had rejected him. She would have been driven into having him if things had gone on as they were, he thought; after all, Percy's disinheritance might have saved his having a wife who did not care for him. But he pitied him just the same, and resolved that no effort of his should be wanting to help Percy in that uphill path which he was to tread for the first time. On the other hand, Percy had not one grain of ill-feeling against the friend who was not only to supplant him in his heritage, but, it seemed, in his love. He could not help his good-fortune any more than he (Percy) could his ill-luck. And thus the two slept that night under the same roof, as little disturbed by the antagonism into which circumstances had thrown them as if they were still boys at school, with no greater rivalry between them than that for the Latin prize or the master's approval.

## CHAPTER XIV.

### HOW UNDINE FOUND HER SOUL.

ONE month after this saw Percy Craven in the chambers of the same special pleader who for one hundred pounds duly paid had allowed Gerald to spend his mornings there. Percy had given up for a time the idea of emigration, and resolved to try his fortune at the bar. After all, he was not so utterly penniless as in the first surprise of his downcome from the principedom of the Hall he had imagined. There were a few hundreds left from his father's property, and these, having been put out to interest and untouched during the whole of his minority, had grown into a sum amply



sufficient to give him a fair start in any profession he might decide upon. He decided on the law. He was still too poor for the army, as a young gentleman of his upbringing would have liked to enter it, and had no vocation for the Church. Mr. Chastelar, too, had influenced his decision. He had written to him, having been urged thereto by a very energetic epistle from Gerald, in which, in plainer language than the dignified old gentleman had been addressed in for years, he asked him whether he intended to do nothing for the cousin of his old friend and client. "If you can't or won't," said Gerald, "only tell me how it's to be done, and I will; I don't choose to go to Mr. Craven, even for him, but when a fellow has expectations I believe it's easy to raise money on them. Can you put me in the way of doing that? I should like to have enough to give poor Percy a good start, either here or in the Colonies. Of course, I shall have to pay heavily, but by

the time the Hall comes to me, I shall either be too old to enjoy it, or else have so much of my own that I shan't want it. Any way, Percy Craven ought not to go to the wall for want of a hand to help him."

Mr. Chastelar liked the writer of this letter better than he could have thought it possible to like his father's son. He showed it to his son Launcelot, who liked him too, and though not in the habit of talking over business matters at home, spoke of Gerald Craven that day at dinner so approvingly that the colour came into Rosalind Chastelar's cheeks, and her mother, observing it, drew her own conclusions therefrom. But Mr. Chastelar wrote to Gerald a grave Johnsonian letter, in which he mildly reproved him for thinking of such ruinous expedients as he had hinted at, but excused the warmth of his epistle, especially its tone towards himself, as arising from his friendship for Mr. Percy Craven. His son and he had that gentleman's interests at heart. They had dis-

cussed them together already—"and would have gone on discussing till doomsday if I hadn't stirred them up," said Gerald, when he read that Mr. Chastelar "was writing to Mr. Percy Craven by that post."

Gerald did not show Percy his letter, but he read the others, in which Mr. Chastelar assured him of his own and his son's wish to assist him in any manner he might think advisable. They would suggest the bar, as hereafter if he showed any aptitude for it, they might help him materially. They begged to remind him of his own small patrimony, but to intimate that, in the case of its not sufficing till he was able to earn a fair income, they should be happy to augment it from the regard they had had for the late Mr. Craven, as well as their personal interest in himself.

"That's all very well as far as it goes," said Percy, "but of course I can't take any money from them. However, I'll try the bar—they may give me a push there, and I suppose one may as well settle down to that as to anything else."

Percy did try it, and a very woful trial it was. As he said, if only any one would have given him five thousand a year and started him in the *métier* of country gentleman he would have done well enough; it was what he had been brought up for—the only profession in the world that suited him, and unluckily under present circumstances the most unattainable. He had not that love of work for work's sake which was inborn in Gerald—the restless, sleepless energy that would have made him, like Alexander, if honours and wealth were won too soon, weep for more worlds to conquer—and the spring and the joy had gone out of his life. It was very well for him to make light of his losses to Gerald, and say that he was content, if Rosalind Chastelar could not be his, that he might have her, but he felt the renunciation none the less keenly, let him tell himself as much as he would that it was inevitable, and that he had nothing to do but to bear it. There was nothing to hope—nothing to work for. What could years of toil give him com-

pared to that which he had lost? How long would it be before he won as many hundreds a year as he was to have had thousands? And in the meanwhile was this dry hard life—one ceaseless drudgery—worth the leading? If there had been anything to bear it for—if at the end of the dreary vista he could have seen a little home with Rosalind in it, sweet, smiling, and happy, there would have been something; but as it was the end of it all was to be that he was to plod on for years in the hope of gaining a subsistence for himself, and that the best he could hope for was to have enough to maintain himself in solitary state as a wealthy bachelor.

For, having given up Rosalind, he had given up all thoughts of marriage. His despair was very desperate. No other woman for him for ever: there was no other like Rosalind, there never could be, and, failing Rosalind, no one should content him. He did not tell all this to Gerald. Where would be the good, he argued, of making him as miserable as himself?

He kept his sorrows to himself, and did his best to understand the legal mysteries put before him, but it was hard work nevertheless, and almost hopeless in its utter distastefulness.

Gerald went on as busily as ever. There was not the slightest reason he could see that he should leave off working. Mr. Craven's life was a good one. Men of his stamp, according to Gerald, always did live long. And he had a home to provide for Rosey just the same. After a while he gave himself a short holiday and went down to Stretton, where he stayed with Aunt Christine, thinking that, by this time, Miss Chastelar must have had quite time enough to think about it. "I'll tackle the mater, though, this time," he said; "after the hint she gave Percy it's as well to be on the safe side. Once sure of her I shall have no trouble with Mr. Chastelar, and as to Rosey, well, I think when a girl says she'll think about it, a fellow has a right to conclude that she only means to think in one way."

He did not go near the master of the Hall. Once they met in the high road, Mr. Frederick Craven riding, Gerald on foot ; the former looked keenly, anxiously at his heir, as if seeking for some acknowledgment of his presence, but in vain — Gerald looked steadfastly another way. And so they passed—not a sign of recognition between the two men standing before the world in the nearest possible relation to each other. Gerald was quite undisturbed by this rencontre, but Mr. Craven ground his teeth and passed on, his pale face yet a little paler. “Beggars’ brat,” he hissed, “let him take care, or he shall never mount the horse that is to carry him to the devil.”

Mrs. Launcelot Chastelar received Gerald very graciously. She listened to his proposals with perfect complacency. Even Gerald’s announcement that he should have to wait for his wife, and that when they did marry they must begin housekeeping on a very humble scale, did not lessen her warmth to

him. Only in one thing she differed from him, his determination to take nothing from his father, and to persist in his avoidance of him. She told him plainly—not austerely, or harshly, but still very plainly—that this was undutiful and unchristian. It was not for a son, said Mrs. Launcelot Chastelar, to judge a father's failings too severely, and after all, which of us frail mortals was perfect? If Mr. Craven went on as he was doing now, society no doubt would overlook the past—nay, it was already beginning to do so. Several gentlemen, Sir George Marsh for one, had recognized Mr. Craven at the hunt, to which he had subscribed very handsomely, and it was not at all unlikely he might be nominated magistrate on the next vacancy. Gerald was extreme in his views—it really was going too far to say that he hoped no gentlemen would be found to sit on the same bench with him. She should be sorry to see such an illiberal, uncourteous spirit manifested. No doubt Mr. Craven had been peculiar—wild—to say the



least, but unhappily of how many gentlemen might as much as that be said! It was quite time that bygones were bygones, especially situated as Gerald was.

All of which Gerald heard with exemplary patience. He had made up his mind to see as little of his mother-in-law after he married as possible, and to put up with a great deal from her when seeing her was unavoidable. But she was quite on his side, that was a good thing; and she prepared Mr. Launcelot Chastelar to receive him cordially. Before Gerald presented himself to him in due form as a suitor for his daughter, that gentleman was aware that he would have very little domestic peace if he did not receive him favourably, and was therefore to some extent prepared to do so. He would have liked Gerald better if he had been another man's son, but he was prepared to condone the fact of his parentage if Rosalind approved of him. Gerald was pretty confident about winning Rosalind's approval if he only had her father's. As to Mr.

Craven, they were at one there. Mrs. Launcelot Chastelar had used her utmost efforts to induce her husband to call on Mr. Craven, but in vain. He gave way to her a very great deal; as men do give way to women who are endowed with invincible obstinacy and very little sense; but not even his love of peace and quiet, which was now all that he looked for as his ideal of domestic happiness, could make him agree to overlook Mr. Craven's past. Mrs. Launcelot thought herself ill-used, and laid a great deal of her husband's determination to her father-in-law, who she informed Gerald was getting into his dotage, and old men were always so wrong-headed when that was the case. But her husband was firm; nothing, he told Gerald, should ever induce him to enter the Hall as long as Mr. Frederick Craven was its master, to which Gerald replied that that was precisely his own view of the matter. "One can't help the fact of the relationship. I'm sure I wish I could, with all my heart; but it's out of the

question having anything to do with him. Of course Rosey and I shall have a fight for it, but I'm not afraid of not winning the day after all."

In his own mind Mr. Launcelot Chastelar was not at all sure that the fight would be a very long one. Those who saw Mr. Craven nearly did not credit him with a very sound constitution. Gerald was quite honest when he avouched his belief that his life was good for the next thirty years, but no one else shared that belief. However, as Mr. Launcelot Chastelar could smooth matters for his daughter, and Gerald was heir apparent to a very good entailed estate, there was no great imprudence in sanctioning his addresses, and before he had been a week at Stretton he was formally engaged.

The person with whom he got on the worst, after all, was the young lady herself. She was shyer, colder, stranger than he had ever known her. What could it mean? Were all girls like this when they became

engaged? or had her mother been teaching her some of her own notions of propriety with which to petrify him? Most likely the latter. He noticed that they were left very little together; which he supposed was due to Mrs. Chastelar's ideas of etiquette under the circumstances. No doubt she drilled Rosey well as to her behaviour; perhaps the poor little soul would hardly dare to be natural till they were fairly married, unless he got her up to London under Claude's charge; but when he hinted at the possibility of her paying such a visit, Mrs. Chastelar shook her head and gently scolded him for hinting at such a thing. Claude Ruddfield wanted a chaperone herself, instead of officiating as one. It would never do for two young girls to be in London together. As to Mr. Edgar Ruddfield, he was really almost worse than nothing. What could be expected from him in a matter where propriety was concerned? No; Gerald must come down again at Christmas and see them—see his intended

in the best and fittest place, under her father's roof.

That was all very nice and very proper, especially as Mrs. Chastelar said it, but how he would have liked to have seen her somewhere else!—at Aunt Christine's, at Mr. John Ruddfield's, anywhere away from home, and from her mother, who seemed to chill all the sweetness and buoyancy out of poor little Rosey. Sometimes a dreadful idea took possession of Gerald—suppose Rosey should grow up like her mother! Just as chill and proper and well-behaved, as invincibly right on every point of propriety and etiquette! He had sometimes seen indications in her character that pointed to such a possibility. Fancy Rosey in the years to come chilling him as her mother chilled her father, living by rule and rote,—measuring her words, her kindnesses, her civilities according to the social status of those with whom she came in contact. Rosey—his pretty, childish, gushing Rosey—chilled into another moving icicle like

her mother. It was almost enough to disenchant the most impassioned lover in the world !

But Gerald hardly did Rosey justice. If ever the girl was bidding fair to grow up into something totally unlike what might have been looked for from her training, it was just then. Gerald did not at all delight in poetic or imaginative literature ; if he had he might have learnt from the story of the sea-nymph upon whom love bestowed a soul, something very nearly like that which had befallen Rosalind Chastelar. Perhaps she would never have cared one half so much for Percy Craven if his misfortunes had never befallen him. If things had gone all smoothly and well there would have been quite too much to think of in refurnishing the Hall, and all the glories and honours that were awaiting its mistress, for her to have very much time to think about Percy himself. As it was, all that was best and true and kind in the girl woke up at her lover's

troubles, and a great deal that might otherwise never have woke up at all. She was not wholly her mother's daughter, though Mrs. Chastelar had done her best to make her so. The old Huguenot blood, with its warmth and its force and its steadfastness, was in her, though it would never have woke as it had done if Mr. Frederick Craven had not made his very inopportune appearance. She was afraid to tell her mother all she felt ; she had said as much as she had dared, and Mrs. Chastelar had guessed the rest. Then she saw her work, and did it. Not thoroughly, for to have done it thoroughly would have involved the stamping out all traces of Percy from the girl's poor little heart, but at any rate she did it well enough to induce Rosey to listen to Gerald's wooings, and if she did not respond to them warmly, at any rate not to give him a decided repulse.

He was fairly satisfied. At least he saw nothing to make him uneasy on account of those confidences with which Percy had

regaled him. He was not jealous by nature—what was there to be jealous of here? Rosey was on her good behaviour, that was all,—as everybody was obliged to be who had to do with Mrs. Chastelar; once away from her mother, and the little creature would be herself again. And perhaps after all it was right; a girl should be coy and distant. Rosey's engagement had made a woman of her; that had a great deal to do with this change.

But he had other things to think of than than the ways of engaged young ladies, or what propriety required of them. There was his work in London waiting for him, and he had to go back to it, quite satisfied with the work he had done here. Mr. Launcelot Chastelar liked his hurrying back, or rather he liked the energy it displayed. There was no absolute need for the work. It could not be very long before Gerald had such an income as would make him quite independent of his small earnings, but meanwhile it was best for him to be employed—he



might very easily find a far worse way of spending his time than in the chambers of Lewin Greene, Esq.—he would at least be acquiring habits of steady plodding industry, which would be of service to him in after life. And Mrs. Chastelar was very pleased to let him go too. Looking after Rosey was more troublesome work than she had ever expected to find it. After all the trouble she had taken, after the years of constant care and attention, to find her false to all the principles which had been both by precept and example so sedulously inculcated! Mrs. Chastelar was seriously unhappy, but she took it as a cross—we all had our crosses, and Rosey, unless great care was taken, was likely to be hers. It was very hard, after the masters, and the French governess, and all that had been lavished on her, Rosalind (even in her thoughts Mrs. Chastelar never called her daughter Rosey) fretting because she could not throw herself away upon a young man without a penny.

She should not so throw herself. Mrs. Chastelar had an infinite amount of obstinacy, which she called firmness, and having made up her mind that her daughter's interests were to be protected, and that she knew how to protect them, was resolved to have matters her own way, let the girl struggle as she might. But it would not do to let Gerald witness such struggles, and therefore it was very much better for him to be in London, where he would have to be content with a very properly worded letter from Rosalind once a fortnight, and where there would be no likelihood of his finding her in an unguarded moment, without her mother by to school her as to her deportment. Every way Gerald's departure was an immense relief to Mrs. Chastelar, though she shook hands with him with the utmost sweetness, and even tendered her thin sallow cheek just a little forward, so that he might have kissed it if he had pleased, which he did not, although he saw the tendering of the cheek perfectly

well. "It would be a bad precedent," thought Gerald. "I'm not going to be too fond of my mother-in-law. One must draw the line somewhere. I shall draw it at kissing."

## CHAPTER XV.

### IN DREAM-CORNER AGAIN.

CLAUDE RUDDFIELD seemed likely to follow in her Aunt Christine's steps as universal comforter, confidante, and prop. Every one seemed to bring their troubles to her. Her father was better already for having her to talk to over the disappointments he had experienced, and the great things he hoped yet to achieve; and Percy found what little solace there was in his miserable life in Claude's pretty drawing-room whenever he could find her alone. He got into the way of going there while Gerald was at Stretton, and his principal object in going seemed to be to talk about Rosalind. That

was the trouble above all. He knew what Gerald had gone down for, as he told her; of course to make sure of the girl who was never to be his. Gerald was a good fellow, and deserved her better than any man living, but how hard it was to have to give her up. Didn't Claude think they might have managed after all? Surely a way might have been found, if only Mrs. Chastelar had chosen. He would have borne anything, put up with anything, if only there had been the slightest chance of gaining her. And as to work—wouldn't he have worked, if work would have brought him Rosey; but as it was, what was the good of his boring his life away in those dreary chambers, with nothing to hope or look for after all?

That was always the burden—the story almost every night while Gerald was away. When he came back Claude only heard it every alternate night. Percy had taken up his quarters at Mrs. Grange's, and the two young men pretty well lived together. Con-

sequently they knew a great deal of each other's movements, and neither cared to visit Brompton the night the other was likely to be there. Each wanted to talk about Rosalind, and each was aware that he could hardly talk about her in the presence of the other. Gerald was full of sanguine anticipations of the future, with which his heirship of the Hall had very little to do. He wanted to ask Claude how small a sum she thought would be required for housekeeping—whether she would assist Rosey at the commencement of her housewifely career. Gerald was intensely practical, and in all such matters had immense faith in Claude, as having been brought up by Aunt Christine. Claude was worse than weary of the subject. Was it to be Rosalind for ever, she sometimes thought, with a little anger rising in spite of herself. Rosalind, who seemed to value love so little, and yet was to have so much wasted on her. In these days she seemed to herself growing hard and bitter.

She wondered if other people found her so; but they never did. All the hardness and the bitterness were for herself alone—the sweetness, the patience, the untiring sympathy, for others. She shared her father's hopes, and would not agree with him that his failures were things to grieve for. She gave what cheer she could to Percy, and tried her best to infuse a little courage into him. And she entered into Gerald's estimates, and discussed ways and means with him with as much apparent interest as if it would not cost her more to cross the threshold of the home he was picturing than if a serpent lay waiting there to sting her to the death. She had been an apt pupil in a difficult school; truly by this time she was proving herself pretty well perfect in Aunt Christine's life-lesson of endurance!

But after a while she had a heavier task laid on her than she had thought she should be called upon to bear.

Mr. Edgar Ruddfield spent his Christmas

with his brother at Arkleigh: he took his daughter with him, and Gerald, as might have been expected, though he was nominally on a visit to Aunt Christine, spent a great deal more of his time at Arkleigh than at Stretton. Only Percy stayed in London, poor fellow, brooding over his misery. "What should I come down for," he said to Claude, "amongst all you happy people? You none of you want me. I should only be a dead weight amongst you all; and as to seeing Gerald and her together, why, that would be more than I could bear decently; and I don't want to be a brute, to break out and make those two wretched by the sight of my own wretchedness. You'll get on well enough without me, I dare say."

Then Claude had to soothe and remonstrate and cheer, and Percy's sweet temper came to her aid, and he was very near feeling ashamed of himself. He was not strong or great or heroic, poor Percy; but he was so amiable and loveable, so every way fitted for



the sphere from which he had been banished, that he won people's sympathies in spite of their better reason. You couldn't scold him for not bearing his burden better ; it seemed so hard that he should have a burden to bear at all.

Claude promised to write to him every other day, so that he should not feel himself forgotten, and she gave Gibbs strict charge concerning him, and even accompanied by her went to see Mrs. Grange, and had so long a talk with her about Mr. Percy Craven's comforts, and the best means of making Christmas endurable to him, that that good lady formed her own surmises as to the cause of such interest, and the parting smile with which she assured her that everything should be attended to, just as she could have wished it, was so significant that even Claude could not fail to understand it. She coloured with something very like anger as she went away. What business had Mrs. Grange to look like that ? What right had any one to think of

her in connection with wooing and wedding, or the pleasant tender cares and joys of love? She had put such things away from her for ever. She was not going to sit down and break her heart just because the one especial thing she wished for could not be hers; but, at the same time, she would have no other thing in its place. Her life must be spent for others, she must think of others, care for others, and not her own happiness; well, that might or might not come by the way—a good thing if it did, but life must be borne with whether it did or not.

That was Claude's philosophy; but such philosophy is easier in theory than in practice to a girl of nineteen, and she had not been long at Arkleigh before it was put to rather a severe trial. It was hard enough to bear with Gerald's confidences and Percy's troubles, but she had not expected that Rosalind would want help or solace at her hands; and yet poor Rosalind, just stepped as it were into that troublesome heritage her womanhood,

and with the sore little heart making itself for ever heard, was in greater need of both than either of the young men whose claims upon Claude had lately been so engrossing.

She had been two days at Arkleigh, and had seen nothing of Rosalind as yet. There was to be a family dinner-party in the evening, when Aunt Christine, Gerald, and the Chastelars would all be present. Claude would have just that to bear from the sight of which Percy had so shrunk. But she was a very much braver person than Percy; and as, unless she broke with her friends and relatives altogether—which, however much in love, no well-brought up young lady would think of doing—she would have to see Gerald and Rosalind in their new position very often, and by and by in one still nearer to each other, it was as well to accustom herself to it as soon as might be. She had stolen away from the noise of the busy house below. The boys were mostly young men now, and away from the house during the day, but two of the younger ones

were at home for the Christmas holidays, and their presence did not conduce to quietness, and the girls were practising and chattering noisily, the servants a little busier than usual; the only quiet person in the house was, as usual, Aunt Ruddfield, who sat and worked at her frame as stolidly as ever. She had varied her slipper patterns just a little; she worked them in Berlin wool now instead of braiding them on cloth; but otherwise things seemed just the same with her. Only there was nothing restful or refreshing in Aunt Ruddfield's quietness to look at—rather the reverse; she bored and excited you; you wanted to stir her up, to see if nothing would goad or excite that still stagnant nature. Was it stagnant *through*. Did the duckweed only cover the surface, and below did fishes glide and swim, or was life present in some manifestation or another, although hidden from common eyes? That was a speculation in which Aunt Christine had sometimes indulged. Claude remembered her making it after a visit

of unusual dreariness at Riverside, but she hardly felt tempted to dwell on it now herself.

She crept away, thinking she might leave her father for a little while. Mr. Edgar Ruddfield was reading yesterday's *Pall Mall*. He sat on the opposite side of the fire to his sister-in-law, and once or twice, as he looked at her large flat face, her good clothes (such women as Aunt Ruddfield always wear "clothes," and never "dress"), her figure that filled the chair so amply, he wondered to himself whether if all women had been like her there would ever have been an artist in the world. Then he remembered the Dutch school, and was answered.—"But the Dutch school would never have suited me," he thought; "I should have gone in for landscape. Thank Heaven, there would still have been trees and flowers on the earth."

Claude went to the little attic where more than ten years ago she had knelt by the window, and looked out on the life that floated on the river and surged through the

town. She remembered now how Aunt Christine had found her there the very day Gerald had first made his appearance at Riverside. Aunt Christine had called it her dream-corner: she understood now the sad wistful look that had come into her eyes as she so called it. Oh, dear! both of them had dreamed many a dream in that quiet nook which was never to be realized by either. What a sad riddle life, woman's life, seemed; was it to be nothing after all but "sighing and sorrow," or the long dull routine of duties that had lost their zest, of sacrifices that were so often fruitless? Well, it was not so for all. Rosalind was to find life pleasant and smooth enough; all the good things of life seemed to fall to the share of the little careless creature who had only to put out her hand to gather them, and not wit enough to comprehend their value.

And just as the thought passed through her, Rosalind's arms were round her neck, Rosalind's kisses on her cheeks, and then

Rosalind subsided before her into an old rush-bottomed chair that had been put up here to be out of the way till it could be mended.

She was so prettily dressed : all soft bright colours, ermine fur, scarlet flowers and white feathers ; her very hair had such a sheen of gold upon it, that she lit up the dull sombre attic much as some gay flower from the conservatory would have done if it had been placed there, just where the cold wintry sunlight might fall upon it. That was what struck Claude at the first glance ; the next she saw that Rosalind was in trouble, too, like everybody else just now, it seemed to Claude. She had lost something of her colour, and there were dark rings under her eyes, and a sad worn look about the pretty mouth—a half pleading pitiful look such as a child might have, suffering from some hurt which it could hardly understand.

“ I have wanted you so, Claude,” she said, looking wistfully up at her. “ You don’t know

at trouble I've been in. You don't know

I've had to bear since you went away. Why, why did that dear good old Mr. Aven die, and that wicked man Frederick Aven come to life again? He ought to have been dead! didn't everybody think that was? What business had he to come here nobody wanted him?"

"Why should you talk like that, Rosalind?" said Claude a little coolly. "You will be mistress of the Hall just the same,—only you will have rather longer to wait first, that is all."

"No, it isn't all, Claude; I wonder at you. You are like everybody else. You think the money and the house are everything. Oh, Claude, darling, I've no right to talk like this. I am cross and miserable. Won't you help me, won't you comfort me, won't you advise me? Claude, I do so want to do what is right, if I only knew what was right, and felt strong enough to do it." Poor child! the tears were falling fast. After all, little Rosalind had her sorrows to bear just like the



rest of us. Claude felt all her coldness, her smouldering jealousy for her unconscious rival vanishing. There was no other chair in the place, but there was an old tub no longer waterworthy, and this Claude drew forward, and turning it upside down, sat by her and placed her arm round the little creature, saying, "Now, Rosey, darling, tell me all about it."

"Oh, I have wanted you so, Claude—it seemed as if you would never come," moaned Rosey, laying her head on Claude's shoulder. I couldn't wait till the evening, when perhaps I shouldn't be able to say a word to you, but I asked mamma to let me come here at once. None of the girls below knew where to find you, but I thought you would be up here, and so I came. Oh, Claude, darling, can you help me? I never was so wretched in my life."

There was a dazed, puzzled look as she spoke, as if she was astonished, not only at her own misery, but at her power of feeling it. Something had woke within her that astonished

even Rosalind herself. Perhaps Undine now and then found her soul a troublesome appendage. She leaned her head against Claude, and went on in a lower and yet more confidential tone :—

“You remember that day—I think it was the last happy day of my life—Percy’s birthday—when I told you what he had said to me. Well, I liked him then, I told you I was sure of that, sure that I liked him better than Gerald, who—who had said something to me as well. But I don’t think I should ever have found out how much I cared for him if it had not been for all that happened afterwards. If things had gone as they should have done, I don’t know that I should have found that it was Percy himself I cared for and not the home, nor the position in the county—oh, dear ! how much mamma thinks of that—no, nor even the famous set of pearls, which they say are as fine as any in the kingdom. But now—to think of it ! Percy poor, in lodgings, working for his living, and thinking that I never cared

for him—just for him, himself—but only for all that he had ; that I'm satisfied to take Gerald just because he has it all instead !”

“ Does Mrs. Chastelar know all this, Rosey—or your father ?”

“ Mamma ! Yes, I've told her—I told her when she sent away Percy, and would not let him see me—no, not even let us say good-bye to each other—that it was cruel ; I was ill for three days. I thought I should have cried my heart away, but mamma never troubled ; she said she knew what was best, and that I should thank her for it all afterwards, and she went on her own way just the same. I saw nothing of Percy, and he doesn't know—he never will know—that I like him, just *him*, and would go with him, where Gerald asked me, into a first-floor if need be. Then somehow, before I knew how it was done, I found myself engaged to Gerald—mamma managed it all. Oh, Claude ! if you knew mamma as well as I do, you wouldn't wonder that she did manage it ! I couldn't go to papa and tell him, I

should have to lead my life with mamma just the same ; and how could I do it then ? And she talks to me so as to what it is my duty to do, my duty to Gerald, to myself, to my family, till I feel as if I hardly knew right from wrong, or whether, indeed, I ought not to give myself to Gerald without caring for him as a girl should care for the man she marries. Mamma says it will all come right by and by, that she never cared very much for papa before she married him. I can quite believe *that*," said Rosey, shrewdly: "I don't think she is too fond of him as it is. But oh, Claude, what shall I do ? Ought I to let things go on like this ? If only I dared tell Gerald all—I think he would forgive me. If only I could ask him to give me up and let mamma think it is his own doing ! If it were to be done any other way, Claude, there would be no bearing with mamma."

What should she tell her ? If only it had not been for the traitor within, how easy it would all have been ! If she could have said,

as she would otherwise have done: "You have no right to inflict upon Gerald a wife who does not love him. At any cost to yourself, whether or no your own love will ever be happy, you should not go on with this deception."

To have been free to have said those words! But how could she say them, when it was just possible that she might deceive herself; that after all Rosalind's weak facile nature might forget its earlier liking; that Gerald might never find out he had been wronged; that the deception now practised might grow into reality, and these two young people be in the end just as happily mated as if Percy Craven had never been in existence? It seemed to her that, if she told her what at the first impulse it had been on her lips to say, her secret would betray itself; that Rosalind would guess how deeply interested she was in Gerald's happiness; that one way or another he would learn what advice she had given, and condemn her for it. She could

bear the not being loved—that had to be borne with—but she could not bear the possibility of any such scorn as she imagined might fall on her. And here was the poor little soul before her, looking up to her for advice and aid, and she almost powerless to speak a word. How gladly she would have spoken it! She was afraid that her own pain was making her selfish and callous to that of others, but at last she found breath to say, “Go to Aunt Christine, dear. This is a thing I can hardly advise you upon. Aunt Christine always knows what is best.”

“I wish I could,” cried poor Rosalind: “mamma never lets me go to Stretton now. I have not seen Aunt Christine for weeks, and then only with other people by. When I look on her, Claude, so fair and sweet, I feel as if I would give anything if I dared fling myself upon her neck, tell her all, and cry my troubles away. That is just what Aunt Christine seems made for—to be everybody’s comforter and help. Claude, do you know I

think you are a little like her after all?—in your way, I mean. I wonder whether you will ever grow up into being every one's comfort and help too."

Claude thought within herself that if Aunt Christine had passed through such a probation as she was now doing, before she understood how to help others in their need, she had paid a dear price for the precious gifts of sympathy and self-forgetfulness. Was it, after all, too much? "I suppose some must suffer," thought Claude, "or they would never know how to help others. It seems hard, too, but perhaps it is just such as Aunt Christine and I that can bear the suffering."

Rosalind went on, "Mamma does not like Aunt Christine; perhaps she thinks that papa liked her too well once; but she never kept me from her as she is doing now. I know why it is. I know she thinks I should tell her everything—I wish I had the chance! If only I could get to her and ask her what was right to be done, I think she would make

me feel strong enough to do it. Mamma says I went too far with Gerald that day. Perhaps I did ; I was so silly. It all seems so long ago, as if it could not be only a few months since I was such a child, and hardly knew which of the two I liked, but yet was glad that both liked me. She made me tell her all that passed, when Gerald proposed ; and then she said I had gone too far to draw back, that I had given him hopes which I was bound not to disappoint. I might have gone a great deal further, and she would never have said that if he had not turned out to be the heir to the Hall. Oh, Claude, what a lucky girl you were to have Aunt Christine to bring you up ! I sometimes wonder what I should have been like if she had married papa. I don't think a girl could do otherwise than what was good and right if she had had Aunt Christine for a mamma. But oh ! Claude dear, if I did wrong by Gerald that unlucky day, when everything seemed so different to what it does now, am I to suffer all my life in



consequence? Claude, would that be right or fair?"

"I don't think it would—to Gerald," said Claude, after a pause. "You must tell everything to Aunt Christine, dear."

Then the lunch bell rang and recalled them to every-day life. "We must go down," said Claude; "they will wonder what we are doing up here in the cold. You poor little Rosey, ain't you half numbed?"

"I have never thought of the cold; I have had so much to feel beside. Oh, Claude, if I could only get to Aunt Christine, and tell her everything as I have told you, what a comfort it would be! Ask mamma to let me take you over to see her in a day or two."

## CHAPTER XVI.

### MR. CRAVEN'S ILLNESS.

THE dinner that evening was as dull and uninteresting as family dinner-parties usually are. Rosey looked very pretty, and Gerald of course monopolized her. Mr. Brown was the only stranger present, for of course Gerald's position with regard to Rosey made both the Ruddfields and Chastelars regard him as one of themselves. Mr. Brown was to all appearance the same as ever : the grace he said was rather too long, and after dinner he tried to discuss geology with Mr. Chastelar in a style that that gentleman thought irreverent and profane. Sixty years ago he had been told that the world had been made in six days. That had

been part of the snug compact little system of theology with which he had grown up, and prospered, and he did not like anything that shook it now—or rather, that tried to shake it. Mr. Chastelar's belief in everything that he had been taught as a boy, the old formulas of religion and politics, was too staunch for any speculations of Mr. Brown or anybody else to affect it. But he did not approve of that style of conversation—it was out of place, especially in a clergyman, and before young people, and he wished that anybody else had been asked to say grace that day.

There was one great difference, however, in Mr. Brown, though nobody perceived it but Aunt Christine. His manner to her had undergone a slight indefinable change. It was if possible more respectful, more devoted than before, and yet there was wanting something in it which now and then had jarred upon her. What he wanted to make her feel—what he felt himself thoroughly—was that he was just her friend ; nothing more

—only of all friends the most assiduous and devoted. Since her own kinsmen had sat by silently when her name had been lightly spoken of—since the time when for a little while they had thought it possible that she would have stooped in the least from that proud height she had always held, it had seemed to him as if he could not sufficiently express his belief in and his devotion to her. He had no hope now of anything but that she would accept this devotion and this friendship—he knew that he could never look for anything more ; he had quite made up his mind to that. The time for love and marriage now had gone by with him. It was too late for him to think of any one else.

Christine Ruddfield had just taken up all his life—all the passion that it was in him to feel for mortal woman, and given him only a little liking back. He knew it all now—all he had given, and all he had gained, and was content. Better her liking than another woman's love. Better to have wasted his life,

if it might be thought so, in waiting for what she had not to give him than to have taken from another all the household joys that might have been rendered him if he had chosen elsewhere.

When Aunt Christine got up to go, Rosey flung her arms round her neck: "Take me home with you, Aunt—take me away," she said half hysterically: Gerald had so wearied her, and she forgot that if she went home with Aunt Christine she should see yet more of him. Her mother remembered it, however, and to good purpose. "That would hardly do, Rosalind," she said with her little stereotyped smile. "I think you forget whom Miss Ruddfield has for her guest."

Aunt Christine held her tightly: "Come by and by, Rosey; come and stop as long as mamma can spare you," and she kissed the girl, and the soft mother-look stole into her face that seemed always to come there when she was with young people, a look that Rosey Chastelar had never seen in her

mother's eyes ; a look that Launcelot Chastelar, seeing now, made him question whether after all this woman whom he had judged so hardly, whom he had let go by him so lightly, would not have been a fitter mother for his children than that wife of his, who was so faultless in every line and rule. Well, he had no business to have such thoughts, and he put them away just as Aunt Christine put Rosey now—only not so tenderly—her mother promising her that she should go over to Stretton soon, which promise Mrs. Launcelot Chastelar knew better than to keep.

Some instinct told her why Rosey wanted to go, and that no good would come of her going ; Miss Ruddfield would encourage her in those absurd notions of hers—Miss Ruddfield had all her life been so absurd herself. A worse guide for a young girl like Rosalind, foolish, nervous, and susceptible, there could hardly be. So the short days lengthened and the early spring came, and then the warmer brighter days, and still Rosey saw nothing

of the one true friend from whom the poor little heart would so gladly have sought counsel. And Gerald up in London, working away as if for dear life, had to be content with the little prim nicely written letters the girl sat down and indited at her mother's order, and under her mother's eye. Mrs. Chastelar was not at all an intellectual woman, and very few people considered her a particularly clever one, but in her own way she was irresistible. The very narrowness of her range made her better able to carry out her purpose. Her intense, quiet, self-satisfied obstinacy gave her a strength that Rosey at least could not withstand. She thought she was doing a good thing—the best thing possible—for her daughter in marrying her to Gerald; and having made up her mind to this, she would have blamed herself exceedingly if she had suffered anything to interfere with a project so virtuous.

Gerald had seen nothing of Mr. Frederick Craven during his brief Christmas holiday; but when the spring came, and he was able to

indulge himself in a short visit to Stretton at Easter, he heard of him from Mr. Launcelot Chastelar not too pleasantly. Mr. Frederick Craven must have found by this time that his life was of the dullest, and was wearying to all appearance of the staid decorous ways which he had at first assumed. Stretton had now something to talk of. There were constantly visitors from London—men who rode hard, dressed showily, lounged in the billiard-rooms of its two hotels, and were generally considered to be anything but respectable. There were ladies, too, at whom Stretton lifted up its eyes and hands in pious horror, but looked after them keenly, and took due note of every article of their dress. Altogether, Mr. Frederick Craven seemed at last doing what his neighbours had expected of him from the first, and giving them something to talk about. That was not all. With his manner of living neither his son nor anybody else had a right to interfere, but he appeared either to be in great need of money



or anxious to raise it in one way or another. Two leases having run out, he had refused to renew them at the old rent, but intimated that he would do so at a much lower if a proportionate premium were paid. Mr. Wright warned him that this was an infringement of his son's rights in the entail, and the lessees themselves not thinking it safe to renew on those terms, the farms were likely to remain unlet. That was not all; he had had some of the timber cut down, and was now trying to part with that near the house, the loss of which would deteriorate the property considerably. It was about this that Mr. Chastelar wished to consult Gerald. "Of course he has no right to do all this without consulting you. You have as much or a greater interest in the timber than he has. You must let me write to him on your behalf, and if things go on further we must file a bill in Chancery for an injunction."

"Wright is at the bottom of it," said Gerald,— "wants to get a good bill of costs."

“No, Wright is not at the bottom of it. He is a respectable man in his way, and an honest,” said Mr. Launcelot Chastelar, much as if he were speaking of his chimney-sweep. “I have reason to believe he has given Mr. Craven very sound advice in this and other matters. Of course you wouldn’t expect him to refuse such a client when he came to him, whatever his private character might be; but I think on the whole Mr. Craven might have fallen into worse hands than those of his present solicitor.”

Mr. Wright justified Mr. Chastelar’s opinion of him, for when his client showed him the letter he had received from Chastelar and Chastelar, threatening him with Chancery if the cutting down of the timber went on, he told him it was only what might have been expected. He was an underbred man, but he knew his business, and, as Mr. Chastelar said, was an honest one. Mr. Frederick Craven looked as if he was a little disappointed in his honesty.

“What is the use of having this place if I am to have my hands tied like this, and by that fellow too—curse him! If with all these acres and the woods upon them I can’t raise a few hundreds when I want them, one might as well be without the bother of the whole affair. To think of that fellow Chastelar! he’ll be wanting to tell me next how much firewood I may have from the estate to use in the kitchen.”

Mr. Frederick Craven took Mr. Chastelar’s letter in such ill part that he sulked with his food and his companions, absented himself from table, and gave his guests to understand that the sooner they left his house the better he should be pleased. When he was quite alone, he sent for Gerald to come and see him, and the other, who was on the point of returning to London that morning, delayed doing so till a later train, at Miss Ruddfield’s wish.

“I would go and see him, Gerald,” she said ;  
“there is no knowing what the miserable man

may want. I think myself he is dying fast ; it will not be much for you to give an hour or two of your life to his, little as he deserves at your hands."

So Gerald went, but found Mr. Frederick Craven in a better state of health than he had expected from the reports which had reached him lately. He looked worn and old for his years, but he was sitting up by his bedroom window, and Gerald had expected to find him in bed, barely able to speak. He was quite able to do *that* at least, as Gerald found by the fluency with which he addressed him.

"So you've come! the first visit from son to father, and that I have almost had to beg for, and this is the second time within the last four months that you have been at Stretton."

"There is no need to go over all that," said Gerald ; "I thought we perfectly understood that the ordinary relations subsisting between father and son were not to be looked for from us. I have come because I thought

you were seriously ill, and Miss Ruddfield urged me."

"Benevolent creature! how I appreciate her kindness. Well, I am ill; but not so ill perhaps as you and she would wish me. But however, if I am in your way, which to some extent I suppose I must be, I have sent for you to see if we cannot agree upon a means by which you may reign here in my stead. I am sick of this place! I am sick of the life! I would rather live in Paris upon as many yearly francs as I have pounds now, than stay here and rust. I want to get away! I was thinking how I could do it without your help, but thanks to that confounded entail I find it not so easy. Why are not entails obsolete with other barbarisms of the feudal age? It's reversing the natural order of things, making the father dependent on the son; if my time were to come over again I'd get into the House and put it to them that way—the reform must come home to every man: now I want a little practical reform on

my own account. I want to leave this. You have a wife all ready to come here. For twenty thousand pounds, which could be easily raised on mortgage if we joined together, I would give you up possession. I wouldn't have troubled you if I could have raised the money in any other way, but Chastelar interfered about the timber, and proved himself disagreeable in other ways. Confounded impertinence of a damned attorney!"

He said the last words in a tone that doubled their emphasis. He was really anxious to gain his ends, and to induce Gerald to join him in obtaining them; but not even this would induce him to forego the delight of sneering at his intended father-in-law. He was watching Gerald intently as he spoke. Would he yield? would he join him in this? Surely the bribe offered to a young man in love was high enough—immediate possession of home and bride, and nothing to give but a sum that could very easily be raised upon the property, and which it would

not be difficult to repay at his leisure. He had told him the truth in saying that he was anxious to get to Paris, but that was not all; he was far more anxious to leave Stretton. He was for ever haunted by the dread that one way or another his crime would come to light. Before that fatal night he had been about as bad as a man could very well be, but he had stopped short of actual blood-guiltiness; now not remorse, not penitence had seized him, but a superstitious terror lest some way or another his sin should find him out. He chafed, too, at the thought that he was in the power of one who was always on the spot ready, as it seemed, to betray him. If he could only get away, only command sufficient money to live luxuriously for a time elsewhere, it would be worth all the apparent security of his position, all the dull tedium of his present life. He went on—

“I don't think I'm asking much, four years' income only, and as soon as the

money was raised I would start at once for the Continent."

"And return as soon as it was gone?" said Gerald. "I don't think that's a bargain Mr. Chastelar—who by the by is as good a gentleman born as either you or I—would advise me to make. But, to be plain with you, if what you propose was the safest thing possible, I wouldn't do it; I would join you in nothing! You and I can have no act or part in common. I came here out of regard to our common humanity, because I believed you to be a dying man, who possibly at the last might wish to send some message of regret to those he had wronged all his lifetime. I did not want to enter into a discussion as to ways and means, or how to join with you in the easiest methods of supplying your extravagance. I will join with you in nothing. Don't you see, don't you feel, or has the life you have led made you too obtuse to understand, that I should hardly care to work with a felon for any



object whatever—that I should feel ashamed ever after to look an honest man in the face if in any one thing I were to co-operate with you.”

Mr. Frederick Craven almost sprang from his chair. “That ever I should have put it in your power to say that to me! You make good use of the hold you have over me; but by — sometimes it seems to me that I could have over you if I pleased a pretty tight hold too! If after all—if after winning Miss Chastelar; after figuring as the future squire, the head that is to be of one of the oldest houses in the county—if after having learned to look upon this place and all it holds—all the woods, not one tree of which you will let me cut—the fields, not one acre of which you will let me raise a few pounds on, so secure do you feel in your coming possession, so certain that one day or other they must be your own—if after all this you and those cursed Chastelars, the men who were too proud to serve me,

who turned their heads away whenever I came near, and who would as soon have touched burning pitch or red-hot iron as laid hold of my hand—were to find that you had sprung from the veriest mire of the London streets, that if ever you found your mother it would be in some trull who could not name her child's father, that amongst the very dregs and offscourings of our London population you would find your kin—if, indeed, to such as you it would be possible to own kin at all. Suppose all this! think of it! realize it! Fancy the Chastelars looking on you when you thus present yourself before them as a son-in-law penniless and nameless, and then think whether it is not worth while to ask me *not* to say the word which will make you all this; *not* to say that Alethea Ruddfield's child and mine died a few months after birth; that the priest is yet living who baptized and buried the little stranger; that I could point to the grave where its

small bones are yet mouldering ; and produce the nurse who tended it at its birth, and prepared it for its coffin !”

“ I don't believe one word of what you say.”

“ I should find it very easy to make others believe it. It suited me to have a son ten years ago ; it suited me to tell Christine Ruddfield that the child she believed dead was living, and by a strange chance had been brought under her care. She had, or thought she had, some hold over me—she threatened to use it—just as you perhaps may threaten to use yours now. I knew she would not do so if she thought her sister's son was living, and seeing a mark on your shoulder so like one on the child that had died, I invented the tale, almost on the spur of the moment. I think it did me credit. Lord ! what sums I might have made by novel writing, if I had only taken to that instead of billiards ! I think I should have outdone the fair Christine.

Well, she believed me. I should have disowned you when I came to my kingdom had it not been for that unfortunate *contretemps*. I've been sorry for that old fellow ever since,—but why did he push himself where he was not wanted? Well, the story served my turn for a time, but I think the truth will serve me better now. You'll hardly like to step down from your pride of place to be just what you were. You must have found it very sweet by this time to have been heir-apparent even of such a little royalty as this. You'll hardly care to find yourself, after this, not one of the herd, but one of those the herd tread upon. I fancy there would come a speedy end to your wooing!"

"Has it never occurred to you that this story, if true, affects yourself? You know what has kept Miss Ruddfield's lips and mine sealed as to that night's work? Do you think if the one miserable tie that links us were broken, either she or I should have any more compunction in sending you to

the gallows than we should in handing over to his doom a wild beast who has been too long at large?"


"Well, I have thought of that, and I tell you I'm inclined to brave it. I don't think you'll push matters to the bitter end, whatever Miss Ruddfield might do; she is simply a clever fool with a conscience! What a trouble that poor woman's conscience has been to her all her life! You are clever, and you are not a fool; and as to the conscience—why, I suppose, like most young men now-a-days, yours is tolerably elastic—we had better understand each other. I will *not* stay here. I haven't long to live; and I'll make the best of my life. Paris gives more in a day than this in a year. To Paris I mean to go; and you must supply me with the funds, raising them in the manner I have pointed out; if not——" he paused, and looked significantly at Gerald.

"Well, if not?"

"This place shall never be yours at all.

I know the pull you think you have over me—confound that old fool, why did he thrust himself in the way that night?—but you wouldn't find your story very easily believed. However, I'd risk that. I have made good use of my time here, spent little, and laid by handsomely. It is so easy to get credit now, that really it seems almost insulting people to offer them ready money. Then there's the plate and the family jewels—I'm afraid, if you disappoint me in this matter, little Rosey will never have those famous pearls; and really the little thing would have looked well in them. I shall decamp with enough to make myself fairly comfortable abroad, and you would find it as easy to trace last year's swallows as to detect my *habitat* in Paris—the first breath of whose delicious air makes me a Frenchman all over. Some luxuries I shall have to deny myself. I shall have to be moderate in Clicquot, I must not dine too often at 'Les Trois Frères,' and must restrict my-

self in flowers. *That* will be a denial. Your English conservatories and greenhouses are the only redeeming feature in your English life. But I shall have a rarer luxury than flowers—a choicer and a dearer—the crowning *morceau* of my life past, the tit-bit that some one profanely, but very truly said, Providence wanted to keep to itself as too choice for mere mortals. Well, I'll have it. A mere mortal, I'll taste it to the full! The luxury, Mr. Gerald Crane—or Craven—or no one knows what—of settling scores with you to the full. You must let me have the few thousands that would make all the difference between decent comfort and such luxury as would amply satisfy my wishes. You have set yourself above me, because, forsooth, our notions of right and wrong and expediency differ. I have my moral code, you yours, and because yours is not quite the same as mine, you rate yourself as so much the finer fellow, that you cannot even behave with the commonest civility. Bah!



you fool! haven't I seen it all along? You have actually dared to despise me because I have in one or two little matters shocked the sensibilities of respectable people. You had better not have done it. Well, unless we come to terms, I'll settle for that and all the rest in full. Before I leave here I shall place a small document in Mr. Lawrence Wright's hands, of which I think he will know how to make good use. He will receive and pay the rents to my agent abroad. In the event of your opening your mouth he's to learn from me that he is to open that paper; in the event of my dying he will do so in any case. I think he will know how to make use of what he reads there. I should like to see little Wright wielding the whip over you. The best of it is, the little fellow has had the impertinence to preach to me once or twice; he has almost tried to take high ground: this will pull him down—turn him into the regular villanous lawyer of romance, with a secret that he is for ever



holding over his unhappy client. You'll have to come to terms with him. Little Wright's honesty won't be proof against the temptation. He'll drive a tighter bargain than I shall. Don't you think that on the whole it will be best to make your bargain with me?"

"I shall drive a bargain neither with him nor with you; I don't believe your story," said Gerald. "If ever I am convinced of its truth, I shall know how to act; but that will not be by buying either Wright's silence or yours."

"You'll talk differently by and by;" then he paused as if a sudden spasm had seized him. "I think those flowers make me faint," he said in a low tone, and waited as if for breath. "Don't flatter yourself," he added mockingly, as he looked up and saw Gerald's eyes resting curiously upon him; "I am not going to vacate this place just yet." He waited another minute, then walked feebly to the window and opened it. "I must not

have so many roses," he muttered ; "or perhaps it's the heliotrope ;" and he looked regretfully, yet half spitefully too, at the flowers around him. He sat down by the open window and drank in the outer air ; then, apparently much stronger, went to a small closet in the wall and, unlocking it, took out what appeared an ordinary letter, only as yet neither directed nor sealed.

"I have not quite finished it," he said ; "it wants two or three concluding lines and the signature. That done, I think there's a pretty clear narrative of the causes that induced me to invent a son, and select you for that personage. I had a fancy to sign it in the presence of Lawrence Wright himself, and have it witnessed as if it was a will. I should like there to be no dispute as to its authenticity, and they will find it easy enough to obtain the proofs to which I refer. I wonder what Wright will do with it," he added thoughtfully. "If I thought he would let you off too easily, I'd send another copy

to Chastelar. I think you might say good-bye to his daughter then."

A footman now entered, to inform his master that Mr. Wright was below.

"I sent for him; I had some little matters to talk over with him," Mr. Craven said to Gerald. Turning to the man, "Tell Mr. Wright I shall be glad to see him in a few minutes. I will ring when ready, and you can show him up." Then to Gerald, when alone, "Will you come to terms *now*? I have everything *en train*. I can leave this place in an hour or less as easily as I can walk across the room—more easily than I walked across it just now; roses do affect me in the manner you saw sometimes. I have only to sign and give this to Wright, and he has you in his power at once, a power that I think he will know how to use hereafter. On the whole, don't you think it would be as well to consent to the mortgage? These family differences are awkward things. Couldn't you and I settle ours amicably?"

Gerald walked to the side of the mantel-piece and pulled the bell-rope. "Mr. Wright will be here in a minute, according to your directions. You can tell him anything you please. You have had my answer."

Mr. Craven looked, with an evil intentness in his eyes, at the man who was apparently defying him. Did he really mean it? Would he let house and lands and name all go sooner than do the thing he was asked, because he either scorned the thing itself, or him who had asked him to join in it? Or did he think that he either could not or would not carry out his threat? doubt his power or his will? He would show him that he had both in an instant. He had set him at defiance; let him see what would come of it.—Again that deadly faintness! What a fool he was to have the room so full of flowers! Was he going to lose his senses? What was the meaning of it all? What a good thing Wright had come when he did. "Air—more

air," he gasped, and then, more fiercely, "Brandy!"

They gave him both, opened all the windows and poured the spirit down his throat. He recovered himself, shook hands with Mr. Wright, and ordered the flowers to be taken out of his room. Presently he said, "I am glad you have come, Wright. I wanted you. There is something here I thought of giving in your charge—this paper here—which affects the interest of that young gentleman rather more than he chooses to believe. Only there was a line or two I wanted to add, and I thought I should like to sign it in your presence—yours and a couple of the servants. I want it to be quite clear—quite—that—that—oh, Lord! the room is going round again. Take those cursed flowers away; they're like women—they betray those who love them best. Air, I tell you, air—brandy!"

His head fell back, and the whole figure seemed to stiffen before them into a semblance of death. One hand still lay on the paper,

but was powerless to clutch it. The eyes glazed, the jaw dropped, and Mr. Wright rang the bell violently, and ordered the first servant who appeared to go off instantly for medical assistance.

The servants crowded round him, each one recommending some restorative or another. He was alive, for the breath came and the heart beat feebly ; but it was death in life—a speechless, blank, blind unconsciousness of all present. Even that paper which was to have been such an instrument of torture over Gerald was unregarded now. Mr. Wright, when he had a little recovered his senses, was about to secure it, but Gerald took up the document. “ It has neither seal, signature, nor address. I think, by your leave, Mr. Wright, I am the fittest person to take charge of it in Mr. Craven’s present condition.”

Mr. Wright would have liked to have had it himself. His curiosity was roused, and perhaps the possession of this paper might have been beneficial to his interests. But

it would not be advisable to dispute with the heir apparent on this matter, and certainly not wise to run any chance of offending him. To judge by the present state of his client, it could not be many hours before Mr. Gerald would be master of the Hall.

The doctor was not long in coming, and was not so much surprised at the suddenness of the seizure as had been anticipated. "Heart affection," he said shortly; "has been suffering from it for years:" and Mr. Wright saw in his eyes that recovery was doubtful in the extreme, and drew his own conclusions. "If he does get better," he thought, "he'll most likely have forgotten all about the paper. Indeed, it was most probably a mere craze, the effect of this illness coming on, that made him think of it at all. It couldn't be a will; the whole thing seemed but the size of a letter; and he'd hardly have made a will, however simple, without consulting me. Besides, he can have nothing to leave, unless he had insured his life, and, in the state of

health he has been in for the last six months, what office would have taken him? However, he may have done it before. Still, as the thing by his own account is not signed, it is worth nothing, and it's no use disputing with Mr. Gerald. The Chastelars will have the business, but it's better to wind all up amicably."

Accordingly, he went up to Gerald, and said: "You'll stay here, I suppose, till matters take a turn. The servants, some of them I believe, are a queer lot; and should any of Mr. Craven's friends come from London on hearing of his illness, if they are of the set he has recently had down, it would hardly be safe to let them have the run of the house. Can I order a room to be got ready for you, or will you give your own orders?"

"Thanks; I'm competent to do that. I'll stay here. I suppose, under the circumstances, it's only commonly decent;" and he looked at the white, stiff figure, which was now placed in the bed, and wondered whether



those blue lips would utter taunt or jibe or menace more. Then he rang the bell, and gave directions, Whether the man who had called him son had spoken truth or not, there was need that some one should be master in the place instead of the stark figure lying there. "By and by we shall see who it's to be," thought Gerald; "but Percy isn't here now, and I am; and whether he or I is to gain by it, things are to be kept straight and square, if possible."

He sent a note to Miss Ruddfield, acquainting her with the state of affairs, and another to Launcelot Chastelar, which filled Mrs. Chastelar with mingled delight and anxiety. She concealed both decorously, and went into her own room to talk matters over with Rosey.

"We shall have the blinds down if he goes—I think that is due to Gerald; and it will only be proper for us to wear slight mourning. Your papa ought to go to the funeral: it will look odd if he does not. I don't know for

how many years the Chastelars and Cravens have not gone to each other's funerals. It's a compliment they have always thought it right to pay to each other, and your papa and grandpapa really ought to do it under the present circumstances. As to Craven's little peculiarities, well, I think people ought not to carry their resentment beyond the grave; things ought to be forgotten then. I suppose the wedding will soon follow. There will be no reason to wait, after all."

"Mamma! you said I should wait," said Rosalind. "You said it was not to be till some years had gone, till I had had time to learn to like Gerald—as—as—as I should like him. Mamma! mamma! it can't be hurried on like this; I must have time. You always said I should have time," pleaded the girl.

"So I did, my dear, when circumstances were different," said Mrs. Chastelar. "Of course, if matters are changed, and you are no longer under the unpleasant necessity of a

long engagement, we ought to be very thankful that anything so disagreeable is spared us. As to liking, no modest girl would like any gentleman till she is married to him—in the way you mean—and you have seen quite enough of Mr. Gerald Craven to be sure that the liking will come in proper time. Rosalind, I must request you not to give way ; if you did but know how very distressing such ebullitions of feeling are, I am sure you would not indulge in them.” Mrs. Chastelar was a little concerned. Rosalind would make her eyes red, and the servants would talk—perhaps her father inquire the reason why she had been crying, and to keep him from ascertaining the real state of Rosalind’s feelings was just now a very serious task for her mother. She gave the girl some sal volatile, bathed her eyes and cheeks, and told her to lie down till she had recovered herself. Then she went down, feeling that if the Fates were one half as good to her as she deserved they

ould be, they would carry Mr. Craven off  
nce, and so facilitate matters for the speedy  
n of her daughter with the future master  
he Hall.

## CHAPTER XVII.

### TEMPTED.

THE Fates were good to Mrs. Chastelar, at least she thought them so, in taking Mr. Craven out of a world which certainly was none the better for his living in it. She did as she said : had the blinds drawn down, and put Rosalind and herself in slight mourning ; using her best endeavour, but in vain, to induce her husband and her father to attend the funeral.

Mr. Craven had not kept her long in suspense. His illness had only lasted four-and-twenty hours, during which Gerald remained at the Grange. When all was over—when the head of his house had gone where even

he must cease from troubling, Gerald desired Mr. Wright to put seals wherever requisite, and to give the necessary directions for the funeral. Mr. Wright was sufficiently gratified by being thus employed—it showed confidence in him—it was possible that after all his services might be retained as the family solicitor. He would have liked to see the paper of which Gerald had possessed himself; morally, of course it was his, and there was no knowing how useful it might have proved, but legally Mr. Gerald Craven was perhaps best entitled to it, as it was neither directed nor sealed. At any rate it was not worth while having a dispute with the heir of the Hall just as he had succeeded to his property, upon what might turn out to be utterly valueless after all.

Gerald had mastered the contents of that paper within two hours after it had come into his hands. They were just what the writer had indicated. If true, then Gerald owed his elevation to his present position

to a fiction forged to suit Mr. Frederick Craven's purposes. It might be a lie. The creature who wrote that paper was capable of inventing it, if for nothing else but ever out of his grave to torment and harass as he had done in his life. But it might be true; "and in that case," said Gerald to himself, "I am very clearly in the wrong place, and shall have to make way for Percy."

There was some humiliation—nay, a great deal—in the thought; an inexpressible bitterness in the idea that after all he belonged wholly and solely by birth to the Pariah class from which Miss Ruddfield had rescued him. He had not felt at the time how much the fact of his having an acknowledged parentage, a name to which he had an undoubted right, involved. He was to go back to his original nothingness. True, he had made up his mind to work his way up from that nothingness—to win a name for himself to which that of every long-descended squire in Eastshire should be as nothing. Before

he had heard that he was of as good a house as any in the county, he had said that it was much better to found a family than to inherit one with all its traditions, weaknesses, and follies. He had been very boastful, very confident, and yet, in spite of the wretched man from whom he was to inherit his name and position, he had found it a pleasant thing to have them, pleasanter now than he had imagined. It was not the money, it was the having a sure and certain standpoint that had elated him. After all, it was a good thing to be born a gentleman, even if he had had a scamp for his father. And now the scamp was likely to be removed, people would soon forget his existence, and only the fact would remain that he, Gerald, was one of the Cravens, who, till this last most miserable exception, had all held their place in the county with honour and respect, and had handed their name down, if not greatly distinguished, at least unsullied from one generation to another.



"And I should have distinguished it," thought Gerald. "I would have done something for them if they had but let me belong to them. And now it's all to begin afresh, and I am to work my way up from the gutter after all."

He felt it now as he had never felt it before, as a few months back he would have thought it impossible to feel it, this working his way up from the mire. Some of the instincts of the class to which he had imagined himself to belong had already worked themselves as it were into his nature. It was hard—the possible downfall—not into mere respectability—into a commonplace middle-class position, but into the nameless obscurity from which he had been raised. It seemed to him now as if he was not merely to sink into Gerald Crane, Miss Ruddfield's adopted son, but into the Jerry of the streets, with all the surroundings of vice and crime and squalor amidst which his childhood had been passed.

"Will they let me have Rosalind now?"

he asked himself. Six months ago the possibility of Rosalind's being refused him on account of his origin would not have seemed probable. But then he was, notwithstanding all the last ten years had done for him, out of the pale of gentleness; now he had gone within it, and understood it to the full, with all its prejudices, its rights, and its claims. *Then*, Rosalind Chastelar, a wealthy solicitor's daughter, had not seemed at all too high for a rising young barrister to aspire to; now, he saw her, a well-descended young gentlewoman, with a mother and father in whom were all the instincts and traditions of the class to which for centuries their respective families had belonged, and himself an unknown creature, for whom the best that could be hoped was that he might never know, so as to be called on to recognize, whatever sunken woman or outlawed man he might trace his being to. The gulf between himself and Rosalind was not one whit wider than it had all along been, but he saw now that it *was* wider, so wide,

that it was more than probable no exertion of his, no prospect of ultimate success and fame, would be allowed to bridge it. For a little while—just a little while—he seemed to have been raised into a caste, only to learn how indelible a thing caste was, how impossible it would be for him to efface the Pariah stamp—the stamp which now seemed burning in him like a brand.

“He will have his revenge,” he muttered, “if this tale is true. To think of his stabbing me like this! And oh, Lord, only this miserable bit of paper to do it all! If he had never taken the pains to write it down, I should have thought all he said was just a madman’s ravings, mere words to scare and frighten me if he could. As it is, somehow I feel as if I must believe the story, or at least take steps to see whether or not there is any truth in it.”

Then he looked at the fire which was burning brightly, and then at the paper, and thought how easy it would be to destroy it,

and with it all chance of losing Rosalind, or the fair position to which he had attained. "I could make it up to Percy," he thought; "I would give him everything, everything but the name and my little Rosey. As if he'd take it? No, there would be no righting the wrong that way. I shall have to give up all or nothing. There's no medium. I must be entirely honest or entirely vile, and I don't choose to show myself worthy after all of being Mr. Craven's son by becoming the latter. Meanwhile, sometimes the best thing a man can do is to take precautions against himself. Rosey, darling, I don't want even you to tempt me into being a scoundrel."

He enclosed the paper in an envelope, which he sealed, then placed it in another directed to Miss Ruddfield, and, accompanying it with a few lines requesting her to keep the enclosure safely and unopened till she saw him or heard of Mr. Craven's death, sent it off at once; then he gave a sigh of relief. "That's done. Now, Percy, it lies between us,

a fair fight for house and lands. You've the best of it any way the name is yours in either case ; whether you win or lose the rest, that must remain. I think they'll be trying to give you Rosey if you get the rest, but you won't get her without a harder fight. And yet I may have to yield my little Rosey. To think that this fellow may yet reach his hand out of the grave and tear you from me !"

He had a miserable time of it while Mr. Craven yet lingered between life and death. Now that there seemed a probability of losing Rosalind, she had never seemed so precious ; and something told him that he should lose her—that against the prejudices of caste and class his best efforts would be nothing. And that paper was true—true, and might possibly be verified. Oh, Lord ! how hard it all seemed, how unjust, how shameful, how cruel, to think that a man like the one lying there should have it in his power to crush him to the earth. Why should he put up with it ? Why should he let him do it ? Just that

miserable piece of paper to stand between him and Rosalind. When that thought occurred to him, he said to himself, "I'm very glad I sent it away. It's in better hands than mine now. If I want to be a rogue, there is precious little likelihood of Aunt Christine's allowing me the gratification."

## CHAPTER XVIII.

### CHRISTINE'S STORY.

IT was all over, and Gerald was again in Aunt Christine's sanctum. She came forward, and kissed him as he entered it. "You have been tried and harassed, my poor boy. Welcome home, till you leave me for the Hall, at last its master. Only I can't congratulate you just as I should do if it were not for the thoughts of my poor Percy."

"I don't know when I shall go back to the Hall. I don't know whether Percy is so much to be pitied after all. Aunt Christine, I want you to advise and help me. Will you open the envelope I sent you yesterday? Read what it contains, and then tell me what to do."

She would tell him at once whether he had

anything to dread ; whether, indeed, this was a fabrication, or likely to be a truth. And, above all things, she would counsel him wisely and honestly, he felt sure of that. Whatever Aunt Christine told him would be right, the one thing that needed to be done. He watched her face while she read the paper, eagerly, hungrily ; it was just his last chance of Rosalind, and of a fair standing in the world. If it had only been the money and the acres it would have mattered little. He could win all those for himself ; but they would never let him have the privilege of winning Rosalind.

Christine read the paper before her slowly twice, then she laid it down, and looked intently and lovingly at Gerald. So lovingly ! It seemed as if till then he had never realized how much sweetness her face held.

“ Well ? ” he gasped huskily.

“ I think, Gerald,” she said, pitifully and tenderly, “ that this may be true. Can you bear it ? Can you bear to feel that I, even I,



must give the verdict against you?" She took hold of his hand in hers, and held it fondly. "It seems so hard for me to have to say it, so hard for me to appear to side against you, and yet—oh, Gerald! Gérard! what else am I to do?"

"You must tell me the truth, Aunt Christine; that is why I sent you the paper. You must tell me the truth, and I must abide by it, even if I have to give up my little Rosey, and sink back, as that man told me I should do, into the mire from which you lifted me," said Gerald, gloomily. His words were brave, but they cost him a great effort. Never till now had he seemed so fully to realize all that he was called upon to yield.

"You will never sink back into the mire," said Christine proudly; "I think I took you from it for better purpose than that. But tell me how this paper fell into your hands; let me hear everything connected with it. It is possible, after all, it may only be some miserable invention of that unhappy man's. Life seemed

not long enough for him to work evil in. He must try, even from the grave, to wreak a little more."

He told her all, and she listened attentively. "There is some hope it may be only a well-contrived scheme to torture and distress you. It was just like him, to think of making Mr. Wright his agent. There was a refinement of villany in that. He would have corrupted the poor little man, who, I think, is fairly honest, and kept you in constant fear. It was not badly planned, but at any rate he has failed to a great extent."

She paused for a time ; presently she said : "We must set this matter at rest, Gerald ; fortunately the thing admits of disproof or confirmation, but it wants an older head than yours, and a clearer one than mine, to do so. I think,"—she hesitated, and in the still fair and peach-like cheeks a deeper crimson stole,—“I think we ought to consult Mr. Launcelot Chastelar. His own interest in the matter is great, and his judgment and integrity unim-

peachable. Besides, he knows all the past—at least, so much of it," she said with a heavy sigh, "as will help him to throw a light upon this matter. May I consult him, Gerald? It will be better for me than for you. There are some things which I had rather tell him, some explanations which can only come from me."

"Yes, undoubtedly, Aunt Christine. Shall I ride over and ask him to come here at once?" he said eagerly. He was in great trouble, but still if he did go over he might catch just one glimpse of Rosalind—if he only heard her voice, saw the flutter of her dress, it would be something.

"There would be no time for him to return here to-night if you did," she said. "I shall write, and he will have the letter the first thing in the morning, and be here a few hours after. It would be better for you to stop away from the house altogether, Gerald, till—till we know how things are; I think they will expect that of you."

"And you think, too," he said fiercely, "that

if this matter goes against me, that if it is proved that I have no right to the name I bear, to the position with which they credit me, that Rosalind's family will take her from me? If they were just plain country lawyers, it might be different; but being gentlepeople of long descent, they couldn't keep their word to such as I. It would be too much to ask of them: that's what you mean, isn't it, Aunt Christine? That's why you tell me to keep away?"

"Gerald!" She looked at him with a face from which all the loving sweetness had passed away, or, rather, was for a moment completely overmastered by intense pain; he had woke up some bitter memories; she could not always live in the joys and pains of others. "Gerald! I *know* the Chastelars," she said sharply; "keep away from their house till this matter is decided."

The next morning, while Mrs. Chastelar, with her face fixed into precisely the right amount of regret that it behoved her to feel

under the melancholy circumstances of Mr. Craven's very sudden death, had gone to purchase the necessary mourning, her husband had taken the train to Stretton, and was being borne along as fast as steam could carry him to that quiet little town, a certain note which he had received by that morning's post lying in his breast-pocket.

It was so many years since he had seen that handwriting that at first he had not recognized it, although the signature at the end had sent a thrill through his heart when he turned over the page and looked at it—"Yours truly, Christine Ruddfield." Time was when she had signed herself to him in another fashion. What did she want with him now, that she asked him to call on her at his earliest convenience? To consult him about some matter respecting Gerald's interests? That was the only solution he could think of. She would have gone to his father, most probably, but that he was now in years, and she shrank from troubling him. And she

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had so completely forgotten her own early romance that she could write to him and consult him, if need be, upon a matter of business as composedly as if he were the merest stranger.

He found her looking her fair, sweet, stately self in the old-fashioned drawing-room, lighting it up with her pretty dress and the soft brightness that pervaded her. Her calmness was a little ruffled ; the colour came and went much as it might have done twenty years ago if she had been meeting him after some little coolness. She was fluttering and trembling, but he did not see it. She was striving within herself how to keep still and placid, and to him she was all stillness and placidity—not a trace of the fond impassioned girl whom he had wooed, and who had been so happy in his wooing, in this bright, handsome, stately woman who had had so much homage since, that perhaps she had long ere this learned to look upon it as a matter of indifference that he had

ever rendered her any. The past was dead to her, no doubt; looking on her, he wished it could be as dead to him.

There was a moment spent in the usual commonplaces; he asked after her sister, and she after his wife and daughter: to-day of all days it struck him as strange that she should do so—that ever things should have been as they were once, and yet that the time should have come for her to frame such questions; then he remembered himself; he was nothing after all but her relative and a professional man to whom she was about to apply for such advice as he might give her in both capacities.

There was a heavier task before her than he imagined; she had told Gerald that there were explanations she alone could give, but she had not told him what these explanations involved. All these years the man before her must have thought, if he thought of it at all, that he had suffered a wrong at her hands; that she had broken her faith

from a mere caprice, and had put his love away as if it was not worth her heeding. It was just possible that events lately might have made him think differently—that he might have learned to judge her more mercifully; but still it was impossible for him to know how sorely she had been tried, how impossible it had seemed to her at the time to do otherwise than she had done. He was not to know all now; a great deal he must learn—a great deal that would extenuate her seeming falseness; but all that it had cost her before she elected to seem thus false he should never know—he, the husband of another woman!

So it was that my still beautiful Christine stood there, for all her seeming calmness, with her pulses throbbing as if she had been a girl of eighteen; but Mr. Launcelot Chastelar's ears had lost the quickness that they had once had, or surely in that clear sweet voice he would have detected a faltering and a trembling that should have told him something.



He detected nothing. He only thought how very lovely she still looked, and how young for her years, and he wondered, as he had often done, that she had never married, and felt glad that she had not. Ah! all these years he had felt glad that the face which had refused to shine at his fireside should never make bright the hearth of another man.

"I have sent for you," she said presently, "because I knew no one whom I could so fitly consult in the position in which my adopted son Gerald—" she paused—she hesitated: had she a right to give him his surname?—"is placed. Will you read this paper? It is possible that nearly all the principal facts stated there are false; it is equally possible that they may be true. It will be a sad thing for Gerald if it is so, but it would not be right for you to remain in any doubt as to the position of one whom you have accepted as your future son-in-law.'

He read the paper slowly and carefully, just as a lawyer would read such a document, weighing every word, and sometimes going over a paragraph again. When he had finished, he looked at her with a little surprise. "This is a strange story. I should have thought you would have been able to answer for its truth or falsehood at once."

"No; all I say is that it is *possibly* true; that things might have been as the wretched writer states; that *so* I might have been deceived; that in the manner he describes I might have been induced to take another child as my sister's son. If you knew all about that miserable time, Launcelot, you would quite understand how very easily I might have been misled."

"I know so little," he said with a slight sternness in his tone. "You have never deigned to make me your confidant as to anything that passed during your residence in Italy."

"You must know it now," she said sadly;

“you will want such knowledge to guide you in your judgment of the facts stated there. If I have never told you before, it was because I thought it the best and kindest thing towards you to keep silence.”

“I should not have thought you were actuated by much kindness in the matter,” he said bitterly, “at least to me; but pardon me, I have no right to complain. Will you proceed with what you have to tell me?”

She began without noticing his tone: “You remember when Alethea, Edgar, and I left England for Rome. We were followed there by Mr. Frederick Craven: for a time he directed his attentions to myself, I should think I need hardly tell you with what success. Then he turned to Alethea; she liked him evidently, she was so easily misled, poor Alethea! We were thrown so much into his society, and when he chose he could make himself fairly agreeable. Even Edgar, who at the first disliked him almost as much as myself, found his feelings changing to

those of comparative friendliness, and learned at least to tolerate him. Time went on, he was making way fast with Alethea, when Edgar was taken ill. He recovered to some extent, but there was no chance of a permanent recovery unless he returned to his native air. It was my wish that Alethea and I should return with him, but she would not hear of it. Our doing so would involve leaving Frederick Craven, and from that I could see she shrank. We had made an acquaintance with a widow, a gay, handsome, fashionable woman—well received, at that time, both in good English and Italian society—more so, I have since had reason to believe, than was due to her deservings. Edgar suggested that we should remain with her as chaperone. He was always so tender and unselfish, and Alethea's evident regret at parting made him anxious to meet her wishes. Then I made a compromise; Alethea should remain with Mrs. Langley, while I went on with Edgar as far as Paris. It was impossible to let

him go alone in his weak state, and yet perhaps it would have been better if I had remained with Alethea. Who can tell? She would have rushed on to her fate just the same. At Paris Edgar was taken seriously ill; the journey had brought on a relapse, and I was two months by his bedside. It was at least another before he was able to leave for England. I heard very little from Alethea during that period, but I was not uneasy; she would be quite safe with Mrs. Langley, I reasoned, and I returned to Rome expecting to find Alethea there, but hoping most devoutly to find that Frederick Craven had gone.

“He had gone, indeed, but Alethea was with him. Mrs. Langley could or would tell me nothing further but that, some months back, she had left Rome in company, it was believed, with Frederick Craven. She had not written to apprise me of the fact, thinking it unnecessary, as she had heard from Mr. Craven, who had informed her of his

marriage with Alethea, and stated his intention of communicating with Edgar and myself. It was no use wasting words on Mrs. Langley. I had no doubt at the time, I have none now, that it was a prearranged scheme between Frederick Craven and herself. He wanted a wife whose property should be entirely in his power: marrying Alethea like this, of course whatever she possessed became so. Mrs. Langley was fluent, sympathetic, and sorry; she professed to have known nothing of Alethea's flight till it had taken place—but at the same time asked how she could have prevented it, even if she had wished to do so. Nobody could. Where was the necessity for flight? Alethea was her own mistress. No doubt Mr. Craven had urged reasons that she thought sufficient to induce her to take a step which was so entirely to his interest.

“I had not been at Rome three days before Alethea returned with her husband. Such a return! Oh, my poor, poor Alethea!

What a wreck he had made of her already! She had never been strong in any way—Launcelot, surely you remember,” she said pitifully, “what our Alethea was—just a creature to be petted and loved and cared for, one whom if possible we should seek to keep from every rough wind. It always had seemed enough for Alethea to be beautiful and happy and bright. The hard work, the unpleasant things of the world, were for other people. She had trusted this man because she had never known what it was to mistrust any human being, and well he had repaid her.

“I don’t know the secrets of her married life; she kept them closely enough; but the man who had married her was one incarnate cruelty. Perhaps he could not help it. It may be—I have sometimes thought it possible—that from his very birth he had had a warp in his nature which made evil good, and all good things loathsome to him; looking back on my life, and the ruin he has

made of Alethea's, I find it hard enough to forgive him. He must have tortured this poor timid creature, to whom, as you know, every one had been tender and kind and gentle from her cradle, much as in his childhood he delighted to torture a fly or maim an animal. She came back to me broken not only in heart, but with the very mind broken. All the life, the elasticity of her sweet joyous nature gone, and as much afraid of the man she had married as you might expect a spaniel to be of the master who has nearly scourged him to death.

“Frederick Craven had impressed upon Alethea that the fact of their marriage must be kept secret ; only a little while before, his uncle had written to him expressing his wish that he should return to England, and intimating that there was a wife awaiting him. He did not care just then to acquaint Mr. Craven with the fact that he was already married. I resisted this secrecy, but Alethea implored me to yield. If I would but let



him have his way in this he had promised that he would leave her with me for a time, and to see her cling to me and beg of me to let her stay and not to cross her tyrant was enough to make one consent. Perhaps it was wrong, a foolish weakness, to consent to any such deception, but at least I have paid dearly for it. Well, he went away, and we took with Mrs. Langley a villa a little distance from the city. I did not like the woman, but we could not live as the two Miss Ruddfields at Rome without exciting comment, and she was at least pleasant to live with, and very kind to Alethea. Time went on; Mr. Frederick Craven did not trouble us often; now and then he came, but Alethea's repugnance and aversion to him were not lessened. I think he liked that. It was a new mode of torturing me, and the cruelty in his nature delighted in strange and unusual refinements. He had another weapon too with which to humble me. I don't know whether I told you, he had offered

himself to me, and I believe he has never forgiven my refusal. Well, he was keeping me in doubt all this time as to the validity of Alethea's marriage! Fancy that! Fancy the weapon which he had forged to keep me in terror with! Sometimes when I look back at the past and think of all I bore, of all he threatened me with, and recall myself young, passionate, and proud, and Alethea with all her young life killed within her, I wonder that this creature's life was safe with me."

She walked hastily up and down the room, her hands clenched, her cheeks crimson, all her stateliness and repose gone, and her eyes, so wonderful in their sweetness and tenderness, flashing as Launcelot Chastelar had never thought that they could flash. Then she paused, and sinking in a chair, sobbed as a girl might have done.

"Oh! what have I borne; looking back upon my life, what has that creature made of it!"

To Launcelot Chastelar standing there it

seemed as if it was the girl whom he had loved so many years ago who sat there crying in her misery to him for help. For a moment his own youth came back, as he thought of her wrongs, and he asked her, as passionately as he might have done twenty years ago, "Why did you not tell me of all this? You should have handed the scoundrel over to me."

For a moment he felt aggrieved that she had not done so; she was just his cousin Christine again, whose wrongs were his to redress, whose sorrows he had a right to share, whose love was the crowning treasure of his life. For a moment, the long blank years that lay between had rolled away. Mrs. Launcelot Chastelar had passed from his life for a moment, with all the shadows of that long, dull past. He was young again, a man with all his life before him, and Christine was a girl growing into the fullness and the beauty of an almost perfect womanhood.

It was the dream of a moment, and Christine's voice dispelled it.

"That would never have done, Launcelot. I had to bear my burden as best I could—alone. No one could lighten it for me." Then she went on, quietly as she had at first begun. She had set herself to tell the long sad story of her life. It was a task that must be got through, and with which no emotion the recital called up must be allowed to interpose. "Alethea had no proof of her marriage; she was so used to have others think for and take care of her, that she allowed this man to possess himself of the certificate, without any other thought than that it would be safer in his possession than in hers. He had taken her from Rome to Civita Vecchia, carried her on board a man-of-war lying at anchor, and the marriage had been performed by the ship's captain. It was all correct and regular enough. Years after, when Mr. Craven died, I obtained the necessary proofs from him, and verified the mar-

riage, but at that time he left us in doubt as to the very name of the ship—very often led me to doubt whether there had been a marriage at all—whether Alethea had not been all along deceived ; or rather, however genuine the marriage, whether it would be possible to prove it. Sometimes he told me it would not—defied me to attempt to do so. If Alethea had been only like her old self, if I had dared to question her and elicit all needful particulars, these threats would have mattered little ; but as it was he had me between two difficulties—the one of proving Alethea's marriage beyond doubt or question ; the other, if she were really his wife, of keeping her out of his power. The best, the only thing at present seemed to be to wait—to keep the silence that he wished. I could not bring Alethea to England with any shadow resting on her ; he swore that if I did so he would disown the marriage, and I believe he would have kept his word ; and so time went on, and Alethea's child was born.

“That was a great comfort to us, I was so fond of children, I forgave this one his father. Three months—three months that this babe made happy, in spite of all the troubles that surrounded us, even the shame that might rest upon us—passed away. In that time we saw nothing of Frederick Craven, till one night he returned, and told us he was about to leave for the New World, and to take his wife and child with him.

“I shall never forget it. Alethea had been growing weaker in mind every day since her child’s birth, and the dread and horror of this man had increased tenfold. There was only one gleam of comfort ; he called her his wife, owned that he had hinted of the possibility of her being otherwise only to humble me, and insisted that the child, the heir to the Hall, should be in his own keeping, Still I withstood him ; he should never have taken her from me had not Alethea herself veered round, and declared her readiness to go. I don’t know how he had influenced her, but

some strange influence he certainly had over her when they were together. She was afraid of it herself at times, and spoke shudderingly of it. It was the fascination of a nature strong in its evil over one utterly, wofully weak ; she would go with him.

“ Mrs. Langley said that acquiescence was the best and wisest course. ‘ He is her husband, and it won’t do to drive him to use compulsion, which it would be impossible for us to resist.’ Well, I let Alethea go, with less reluctance, that for the time her husband seemed disposed to treat her with comparative kindness. She left me almost happily. I was to stay with Mrs. Langley for a fortnight, and then return to England, by which time Mr. Craven, believing that he should have started for the New World, gave me leave to speak of my sister’s marriage, and departure with him. Something he had done, he said, which put all hope of reconciliation out of the question, and I think just then he rather relished the idea that his marriage would show his uncle

how little he had cared to act in compliance with his wishes.

They had not been gone ten days when I received an urgent message from Frederick Craven to come to them at once. They were only at a little village near Leghorn, and I joined them as soon as possible. He had changed his intention of going to the United States. The friend, he informed me, with whom he had intended to link his fortunes had played him false, refusing at the last to go, and he did not care to proceed alone. But he wanted to be rid of Alethea; she was ill again, helpless and imbecile, he told me, speaking for once what was very near the truth. I asked for the baby; it had cost me so much to part with that; Alethea had been so unable to attend to it, that I had had to take almost a mother's place towards it. Sometimes I thought if I had been its mother I could not have loved it better. I think that was partly why he would not leave it with me, just because I should have been so happy



to have had it. Then I heard that it had been seized with a fit three days after they had left Rome, and had died in a few hours. If that was false — if, indeed, that wretched man only forged this lie to suit his own purposes, why then, of all the vile and cruel things he did, this was the vilest and the cruellest. If he had but given me the child to rear, I could have forgiven him almost everything. I believed him then. I did not dare to question Alethea; indeed, it would have been useless; she was in a state of mental and bodily prostration. He told me he must leave her. I believe he would have done so without sending for me, but that he wanted money without the delay it would have taken to raise any through Alethea. I gave him what I had, promised to send him more, and then he left us, telling me the detectives were on his track, and cautioning me as to strict silence respecting him.

“Alethea was ill for weeks—a long, low, hopeless fever. One day, while she was at

the worst, an English newspaper came to me, sent, I have since learned, by Frederick Craven, and yet in that very paper was an account of his death by fire in a Swiss *chalet*. How thankful I was! My sister was free. She would recover; I should have her to myself, and all connected with this miserable wretch would pass away. I had no pity for him, no, even though his fate had been so terrible; it seemed as if it was a thing for unalloyed thankfulness alone. Frederick Craven had left the world, and there was so much less wickedness in it.

“I laid the paper down with a sensation of relief, and looking up, saw the man of whom this horrible story had been told standing before me! His own evil self, gloating on my terror, as at first I hardly realized the fact that it could be him indeed in bodily presence standing there. I soon learned that it was, and with the most unblushing effrontery he told me how he had planned this deception, and the reasons for doing it. You

know all that now as well as I. It suited him to be dead, he said, for a time—dead he must remain; but with the means of living. The remainder of Alethea's fortune must be made over to him, with a further allowance from my purse. He would then undertake, he said, to leave us in peace, and waive his legal rights to his wife's society. Perhaps I might have set him at defiance—have dared him to claim her—have said that he could only prove his right to do so by coming forward and taking his chance of being tried for felony. But I was young then, just a girl, with very little knowledge of the world, and all this had come so suddenly upon me, that I hardly knew how to meet it. The one thing I felt I must do was to protect Alethea at any cost—let the money go, both hers and mine, if need be. I was young and strong, full of confidence in my own resources, and able to work for more. I consented to his terms; consented to keep all his past connection a secret. He said he should

feel safer; one question would lead to another—and if 'that fool his wife were once set talking, she would be sure to set them on his track.' I was quite willing that nothing should be said of that shameful marriage—it was better for Alethea—she could not bear to hear herself addressed by her new name; any allusion to her husband filled her with dread and terror, and people might have judged hardly of her for marrying in the manner she had done, and for marrying such a man at all. My poor Alethea! who should protect her weakness, shield her from every chance of blame, but her sister?

“Well, we were left in comparative peace; after a time I brought Alethea home. What our life has been since outwardly, you know; but you do not know all that I had yet to bear. I kept my compact, but Frederick Craven was not true to his. Even before we returned to England he made fresh demands; he was constantly making them afterwards. He forged my name to a cheque on my own

bankers ; his needs were almost insatiable, and my energies were taxed to the utmost to supply them. The weapons he used to coerce me into compliance were double—sometimes the threat that he would take Alethea from me, at others hinting at the possibility that after all she might not be his wife ; that it only rested with him to proclaim her dishonour. At last he told me that his son was still living ; nay, that the boy whom my brother had rescued from the streets, and whom I had at the time under my care, was that son. I believed him ; perhaps the very wish that after all the child whom I had so mourned was to be given back to me, had something to do with it ; but I *did* believe him, and tried to bring Gerald up as Alethea's son should be. At the time I thought I had taken all necessary precautions. I visited the woman whom he told me had had charge of the child from the time it came to England, and she confirmed what he had told me in all essential

points ; showed me, too, the little garments the babe had worn, some of them my own handiwork—what could I do *but* believe him, especially when he told me that he had sent the child to England on purpose that I should not have the gratification of bringing it up? That was so completely Frederick Craven ; to him there was no pleasure like another's pain. I could not go and tell Mr. Craven the whole truth even then. You must remember that I had no positive proof of the validity of Alethea's marriage. It would have been so easy to have deceived her, and right or wrong it seemed to me better that Gerald should work his way up in the world with such help as I could give him, rather than any suspicion should rest upon Alethea. To have had her honour commented on, criticized, doubted in a court of inquiry, private or public, would have been intolerable. What did it matter after all which boy had the lands and the name, so long as my poor darling was left in peace and undisturbed ?

Don't blame me, Launcelot ; don't condemn me ! In this I will not bear it. Don't judge me hardly for my long silence—for my deception, if you choose to call it so ; if you had been a woman, and brought up to look at things from the same standpoint that I had been, you would have acted as I have acted, have done just what I have done—anything so that Alethea should end her days in peace, and no suspicion fall on her fair fame.”

“ I don't blame you *there*,” he said softly, and she went on.

“ Now you have seen what this paper says. It is quite true, as is stated here, that just before Frederick Craven had introduced Gerald to me as my nephew, I had set him almost at defiance, threatened to tell Sir William Strahan that he was still living, and implore him to go on with the prosecution which still hung over him, in order to prevent him from further torturing Alethea and myself. I was almost mad when I threatened him. He was draining me so cruelly ;

and then it seems by his own avowal that the sight of the boy I had partly adopted, with a mark so like one that the babe we had lost had borne, inspired him with the thought of "inventing a son," as he phrases it here, for the purpose of increasing his hold over me. As he rightly judged, I would not give up the father to justice for the sake of the son, and increased, if possible, my efforts to assist him. Three years I helped him. Then he went away from England for years. What he had been doing all that time I cannot tell, but at any rate he must have been fairly successful for a while for years past, and I was troubled with no further appeals. Then he came back—you remember the day—and was soon after in possession of the Hall, having greater reason than ever to rejoice that, by asserting that Gerald was his son, he had put it out of his power to witness against him as a murderer. How could Gerald go before the world and say that he had seen him strike Simon Flint



to the earth, when he believed him against whom he gave such evidence to be his own father?

“He is past man’s judgment now. Over Simon’s grave, I suppose, a mystery must rest for ever; the poor old man must look for justice in another world, it can never be rendered to him in this. But we must right the living; see which of these two, Percy or Gerald, is to bear the Craven name. He himself points out the easiest means of verifying his story. If the priest is still living who buried an English infant two and twenty years ago; or if the people at the inn where the child died, if it did die, are still in existence, they may confirm this story. If not, there must be a register—proofs of some kind in existence—as he states that Gerald Craven, aged three months, the son of Frederick and Alethea Craven, died, and was buried at Strezza in the year 184-.”

“Disproof of this story would be so easy,” said Mr. Launcelot Chastelar thoughtfully,

“that I doubt if we shall find disproof. I will go myself to this place and make the necessary inquiries, but I should prefer being accompanied. It would be better every way. My bias,” he said, with a faint smile, “is at present naturally in favour of Gerald. “Is there no one whom you could name who would decide impartially between the two claimants?”

“I know no better man, I have never had a better friend all my life, than Mr. Brown,” she said simply. “There is no one, I am sure, in whom both Gerald and Percy would feel their interests safer than in him.”

He looked up with something as near like jealousy as he had ever known. In his heart he had all along felt perhaps as much mild contempt for the Curate as a sound Churchman ever permits himself to feel for any one of his spiritual pastors; still if any one but Christine Ruddfield had named him as his coadjutor in any such matter as the one in question, both from his position and his cha-

racter he would have considered him unexceptionable. But why should she name him? Why had he spoken in her defence when he was silent? He had no right to seek to appropriate her now; no right to cavil if Mr. Brown or any other was honoured by her preference. But he had a right to speak of the past. She had gone out of his life altogether now, but once she was to have shared it. She had not yet told him why she had refused to do so. She had said a great deal, but nothing which, in his eyes, could justify that.

“Let it be Mr. Brown, as you say,” he said coldly; “but I think you forget that this story has other interests in it than those of the two young men between whom lies the inheritance of the Hall. You have asked me urgently not to judge you harshly, or condemn the long silence of the past. So far as others are concerned, I think you acted for the best—certainly with the best of motives—but I think, Christine, that something more was due to me than that letter of renuncia-

tion in which, without leading me to think you were actuated by any motive but the merest caprice, you put me aside. I am yet in doubt as to whether anything but your sister's unhappy marriage induced you to do so. If that were all, I think you used me hardly."

"That was all, Launcelot ; and I still think I did well by you. You could not have borne what I have had to bear. Just think of it. For ever the fear that the miserable creature might be captured, and tried for felony—how could you have borne that, knowing him to be the husband of your wife's sister? You would have thought his shame reflected on yourself ; you would have felt yourself humbled in the eyes of your fellow-townsmen and of every man in the county who, with his father and forefathers, has for generations held you and yours in respect. It was a different matter, taking this man's son for your daughter, though sometimes I have thought that, if you were still just what you

were twenty years ago, you would hardly have done that. But there was no chance, as far as you knew, of Frederick Craven's then standing in the dock as a felon. His early offences were pretty well forgotten, and he was ill, and not likely to have strength, even if he had the inclination, to commit more. And his son was resolved to have nothing in common with him. He kept himself so aloof, that the most censorious tongues could hardly hold him tainted with his father's vices, and over him the father had no such power as a husband may exercise over a wife. But it was altogether different then. Frederick Craven might at any time cover any family with which he was connected with indelible disgrace. The mere dread of it would have been insupportable to you, and if the dread had been realized—if he had stood in the felon's dock, or if, driven to desperation, he had, as he has done, attempted a darker crime, how would you have borne to see him arraigned for murder? You could not have

borne it. It would have crushed you, and you would never have forgiven the woman who had brought this burden on you!"

"You might have given me my choice, Christine, before you put me on one side. You could not possibly be in doubt as to what my answer would be."

"I was in *no* doubt, Launcelot! I knew you too well for that. If I had told you all, you would still have claimed me for your wife, but you would never have been happy afterwards. Fancy you with such a family skeleton—you with such a secret—you with the dread of Frederick Craven's infamy becoming known for ever before you: look into yourself, Launcelot—into all you have been taught to value most, and then tell me if I did not do well in saying that our paths could not lie together. Only picture yourself connected with such a man as Frederick Craven for the last twenty years, and ask yourself how you could have borne it, or how your love would have endured for the wife

who had entailed such a connection upon you."

She was in the right. He knew that, and yet he was ashamed of acknowledging it, even to himself. She had judged him rightly all along. He had thought himself a brave, strong, upright man, and she had seen his smallness and his weakness. He would have held her to her troth if she had told him all; he knew that; but the possible consequences of Frederick Craven's infamy would have come between him and his wife all their lifetime. The burden that she had borne so bravely all these years would have made his life intolerable to him. All the conventionalisms in which he had been reared—the dread of men's tongues—the fear lest any taint or breath should come across his fame—nay, the shuddering avoidance of gossip—the dislike to be made a subject of talk, even this, if nothing more, would have made his life hateful to him, if once Frederick Craven had brought such talk upon him.

He despised himself while he felt this—he despised himself for feeling it, for acknowledging the truth, which yet was so incontrovertible. And, after all, what had his life been? What had the woman, who certainly had done nothing in any way to make either him or herself the subject of men's tongues, done for his life? What a poor arid thing it was! so well ruled, so decorous in its monotony, so unbroken in its calm, so speckless in its respectability! and was this all that life had been meant for? Were those even, uneventful days, with their trim, well-kept order, all for which his being had been given him? Was a succession of these, for it might be the next thirty years, as calm, as uniform, as unbroken in their dulness, all that he had to anticipate? Would not life with the woman before him, even if to flee from men's tongues he had been driven from home and country, have been an infinitely richer, higher, nobler thing than he had ever found it all these dull decorous years?



He thought so now—he knew it—but he knew too that when a younger man, to whom pride of place and position and fair name seemed all in all, he would not so have thought. He had all these now; he had had them so long that he had found how little they were worth—how hard and dry the road might prove that had only such as these to make it smooth!—hard and dry as granite, through which no flowers could pierce, no blossom raise its head—speckless and smooth and well kept, it is true, but oh, Lord! was that the best that could come of it after all?

He felt humbled and ashamed to think how rightly she had judged him, and to think how little worth he had found the things which at the time he had rated above her. Perhaps she read his feelings rightly; perhaps had felt that he was so far changed that an appeal might be made now which years back would have been fruitless. “Launcelot,” she said softly, “you and I

have suffered enough in our time—the suffering is all past and gone, but still the memory of it should teach us something. How is it to be with those two young folks if my boy is not what we have thought him?”

She laid her hand on his arm and looked tenderly and pleadingly at him—much as she had once done so many years ago, only with a softer light, a tenderer beauty; it was the mother petitioning for her son—for the son whose happiness was bound up in his girl. He understood it, or thought he did; but perhaps he was not quite near the truth—of all their past love, nothing was to remain but the lesson its suffering should teach them—the lesson which might lighten the young lives opening before them, if too late to brighten their own. Was she not right? Had not the little provincial world—a more merciless Moloch than any metropolitan one—exact enough from him? He would give it nothing further, and so, turning to her, he said gently, “Christine, we will find out how

things are; then, come what may, these children shall decide for themselves."

She understood him at least. If he could help it there should be no further sacrifice in his family.

## CHAPTER XIX.

### TO THE RICH, RICHES.

MR. BROWN was ready to accompany Mr. Launcelot Chastelar to Strezza, or anywhere else, at Miss Ruddfield's wish. If it would have been of the slightest benefit to her he would have gone to the further end of the world, only staying to pack up a few books and a change of linen. But when Mr. Chastelar acquainted him with the object of their journey, he was ready in all good faith with a proposal for obviating its necessity. "The two young men are really such very good friends. I have all along thought that when Mr. Gerald *did* come into his property it would be a very natural and proper thing for

him to divide it with Mr. Percy. Why shouldn't they do so as it is? It would prevent so much unpleasantness; it really seems as if neither of these two ought to be enriched at the expense of the other, and if things were so arranged it would save the possibility of Mr. Gerald's feelings being hurt by its being ascertained that he is, after all, of doubtful parentage."

"That might be all very well if we hadn't an entailed estate to deal with," said Launcelot Chastelar, "and the certainty that if we settled matters in that way in this generation the next would reverse everything."

"Not if the next generation was properly brought up," said Mr. Brown, looking as if he had half a score of girls and boys around him upon whom he was already inculcating his theories of property, and the amicable adjustment of differences. To the surprise of everyone, his own father included, Mr. Launcelot Chastelar asked Mr. Wright to accompany them on their quest. "I believe in a matter

of this sort," he said to his senior, "he is worth you and I put together. Beyond appearances, and the value of his position, Brown don't count for anything, but if there is any attempt to deceive, any past fraud to detect, Wright will ferret it out to a certainty; and anyhow the man has a tongue in his head, and he had better use it civilly."

Mr. Wright was a little flattered by being asked to act in conjunction with Mr. Launcelot Chastelar. It was giving him a status in his profession which he had never had before, and Launcelot Chastelar was quite right; if there had been any flaw in the chain of evidence they put together, any attempt to deceive, Mr. Wright would have found it out at once. As it was, when they had been three days away, and were returning with their mission fulfilled, he said, "It's almost a hopeless case, I'm afraid."

"For whom?" said Mr. Brown, who was by no means clear yet as to the proper estimate to be taken of matters.

"For *our* client," said Mr. Wright, with a wave of his hand to Mr. Chastelar. "However, I shall advise him to show fight."

"Morally, he hasn't a leg to stand upon," said Launcelot Chastelar.

"Legally, I think we may make him out a good one. I shouldn't yet despair of seeing him proved heir-at-law."

That was what he told Gerald.

"We've found out where the baby died—a baby; the landlady of the inn remembers all the circumstances, but it would be impossible for her to identify the parties; she's nearly blind, and Mrs. Craven is two-and-twenty years older since that time. If she could remember anything, if she had ever seen her child dead, she would have been a powerful witness against us. The landlady's evidence is damaging—two people came, with a nurse and baby. The lady was in a bad state of health; the nurse was sent back, as it appeared to have been agreed upon, to her own country. The lady wished to hire an

attendant for the child, the gentleman to put it out to nurse altogether, declaring that he had had enough of it on the way there, and that a longer journey would drive him mad. Finally, he made arrangements for the child to be taken charge of by the landlady's daughter, and took the lady with him, she seeming in too much fear of him to make any resistance. The next day baby was seized with fits. I'll spare you all the good lady's protestations as to the care that was taken of it; how doctor and father were sent for, and how the latter only came in time to see it die, and give directions for its burial. Then there's the register; undoubtedly we see there the fact of Gerald Craven's death, aged three months, and the names of his father and mother: but after all I wouldn't give the thing up; we have to prove the identity of these people, or rather the other side has to prove it. Then there is the positive declaration of Mr. Frederick Craven, that the boy called Jerry, afterwards Gerald, was his son, and we may



hunt up the lady, if still living, who had the charge of that young person's infancy."

"That's done," said Gerald; "I've seen her for myself. I looked her up while you were away. I've frightened the truth out of her. She never saw me till I was two years old, could tell me nothing of my parents, but that one was hanged and the other—oh, Lord! I needn't go over *that* with you; the clothes were supplied her by Frederick Craven, who taught her her story. Well, after that do you think there is a chance left worth fighting for?"

"I think there is, if you'd only try it," said Mr. Wright. He had warmed to his work; it really was not the long bill of costs that he was thinking of, but there was something in this chase that excited and urged him on. He would have liked to have fought out this fight for the sheer love of the thing; he looked honestly grieved at the thought of giving it up.

"Just tell me plainly," said Gerald; "do you in your soul believe that I am Gerald

Craven, or the Lord, or the devil, alone knows who?"

Mr. Wright hesitated. Then at last he said—

"Whoever you may be, I don't believe you are Gerald Craven, but there's no knowing the view the law might be got to take of the matter."

"Then we won't trouble the law about it at all," said Gerald.

Mr. Brown came to him next. "My dear boy, don't distress yourself about this matter. I have always thought a great estate was a great trouble, and there would have been a first-rate lawyer spoiled if you had settled down at the Hall. As to ancestry,—well, I do think the value people set upon it is absurd. What are we—any of us in this island—but mere mushrooms of yesterday? I won't go back to the Jews, but there's not one of the Oriental nations but has a right to look down upon us in that respect. Our antiquity must seem such a mere pretence

to them. What, after all, is the use of distressing ourselves as to whether we are a few generations more or less better descended?"

"Possibly not," said Gerald; "still I own it would have been a satisfaction to have come of an honest father. However, in any case it seems I was not to have that gratification."

Aunt Christine came next. "You'll bear it bravely, I know, Gerald; you are my own boy still—you seem even more my boy than when I thought that miscreant was your father. Now, go to Arkleigh, and see how Rosalind bears this. Tell her she will have to rough it a little more than she had expected, but you will have nothing to fear from her father. This will make no difference to him."

It was nearly a fortnight since he had seen Rosalind, and he was hungering and thirsting for her. He had not even dared to write, and had not heard from her since Mr. Craven's death. Mrs. Chastelar had sent him

a very well-worded note of condolence on lavender paper with the thinnest black edge. It said just what ought to be said, expressed the right amount of decorous sorrow with the utmost propriety, and Rosalind sent her dear love, which her mamma felt was allowable under the circumstances. He wondered whether her father had told her anything, or whether he would leave it all to him. How would she bear it? It would be vexing, for Rosalind was so fond of bright and pretty things, and he would have liked to have given them all to her. But she would have faith in him; she would believe in his capabilities of surrounding her in the future with all that she could wish for. His little Rosey! as if he would not ward everything evil from her! As if it would not be the delight and triumph of his life to win by his toil all that she could wish for!

It was late to go to Arkleigh, but there was yet a train from Stretton.

Why should he wait till the morrow?

surely he had waited enough. He would go at once and let her know the worst, and see if she had no comfort for him. He did not know very much about women. Aunt Christine was his great exemplar, but even with all his love he could not think of Rosalind as ever likely to grow into another Christine. But he had read now and then, in those very few moments of his life which he had sometimes devoted to lighter reading, of women who had shown their fondness more in the hour of trial and trouble than in the brightest moments. It might be so with his Rosalind—nay, he was sure it would be. Had she not been more genial, less reserved with him in former days, when he was nothing but Aunt Christine's boy, than when she believed that he would ultimately make her the mistress of the Hall? She would be like her own self now, he thought, only brighter, sunnier, sweeter than ever. He was sure of it; all along it was nothing but the money and the land that

had chilled and almost petrified her. Dear little Rosey! she would show, now she knew that he needed them, warmth and love and tenderness, and she would yield them without stint or measure. He felt happier than he had been for weeks; the worst was told, suspense was ended, and Rosalind would make up to him a thousandfold for all that he had lost.

He kissed Aunt Christine as he went away. "Don't be afraid, I shall come back and tell you Rosey wants to consult you about her wedding-dress;" then he left her, looking as radiant with his happiness as if that day he had won a fortune instead of losing one.

"If it had been but Claude," said Aunt Christine to herself, "I should have had no fear. If it had been but Claude, or if the child my poor boy loves so well had but been her mother."

...ain was express, and Gerald was  
...hort time at the Arkleigh station.

The platform was thronged with people when he got out, and he had some little difficulty in threading his way. The last train from London had come in but a minute before, and amidst the groups of people looking for luggage, or returning friends, Gerald found it a matter of time to make his way to the entrance. As he got there he saw but a few paces in front, so near that he could almost have put out his hand and touched him, Percy Craven. He was about to make himself known, but the other hurried on and had sprung into a cab before he could do so.

“They have telegraphed to him,” thought Gerald, “and he’s come down to hear about his luck. I wish he had stayed a second, I should have liked to have been the first to have shaken hands with him and wished him joy ; I think he’ll believe that I grudge him neither house nor lands.”

He hurried on—he was too excited to do as the other had done, and take a cab. The railway speed had been too slow for him, fast

as it had gone; he had caught himself saying two or three times, "If I had walked I should have got there faster. Now he tore on, the excitement of moving rapidly tending a little to lower the fever within.

"Percy would hardly have got there first if he had been going to the same place," he thought; "but I dare say he is making his way to Bon-foy House, to hear full particulars from Mr. Chastelar himself. He'll be pleased enough to tell him—I never was much of a favourite with the old gentleman."

On he went, but his progress was arrested by a crowd of men and boys who had been working overtime at the iron works, and who had just left them. It was impossible to dash through these at the railroad pace at which he had been hurrying, unless he had knocked down whoever came in his way, and the doing so would hardly be desirable. This made a trifling delay, and when he was clear of the crowd, the cab with which he had been keeping up pretty well was out of sight. "Just as I



thought," said Gerald, "turned down the Wichnor Road, and gone to old Mr. Chastelar's. Well, I wish him joy of all that's come to him this night—he'll make a better squire than ever I should have done ; but I should have been glad to have had a name of my own too. Well, the fight's over, and the Hall and its surroundings are his, and I don't grudge them to him."

Only there was a harder fight yet to be fought between these two—something that only one could win, and which yet was nearer and dearer than house or lands or name; and the fight for *that* prize was to be fought out this night, and every moment was bearing both nearer to the point when its loss or gain should be decided.

Gerald was shown into the dining-room when he reached Mr. Launcelot Chastelar's. The dessert was still on the table—they must have sat late after it. But there this sitting had not been for the pleasure of so doing, apparently, for Launcelot Chastelar looked ill at ease and irritated—not at all like

a man who has been a few days away from his household gods, and only returned to them within the last few hours. Mrs. Chastelar looked cross, and gave her hand to Gerald with an unusual frigidity—infusing too at the same time into her face an air of surprise at his visit. "She's dead against me," thought Gerald, "which is just what I expected. Little Rosey, she'll try and hand you over to the master of the Hall, but you and I shall have something to say to that."

He looked round eagerly for Rosalind, and Launcelot Chastelar, who had shaken hands with him as cordially as ever, understood the look. "You will find her in the garden, my dear fellow; go and tell your own story, and see what she has to say to it. The result rests with you and her."

"Mr. Chastelar!" came almost like a scream from Mrs. Chastelar's thin lips, "are you mad, or do you forget that I—I, sir—have a right in the disposal of my daughter?"

"I forget nothing, Amelia," said Launcelot

Chastelar sternly. "I think it is you who find it convenient not to remember the terms on which Gerald Crane has been visiting here so long."

Gerald himself did not hear this sentence; he was at the end of the passage, and opening the glass door which led into the garden, before it was concluded. But as he did so Mrs. Chastelar's voice, angry and indignant, reached his ears. The dining-room door was closed, so that he could not distinguish the words, but their purport was unmistakable. Mrs. Chastelar felt herself ill-used, and was telling her husband so.

"What a cat that woman is!" thought Gerald. "I'll keep my little Rosey clear of her, once I've got her to myself."

Then he was out in the garden, which looked as pretty and fresh this spring night as if it had been miles away from so busy a town as Arkleigh. It was only the beginning of May, and yet warm enough for June; and on the tender greenness of the

lilacs and laburnums the full moon was sending down a softened light. Business was pretty well over in Arkleigh, and at this hour there was little traffic through its streets, so that you did not catch even the hum and the murmur of life which stole over the garden walls in the daytime. It was so still, so sweet, so peaceful, no wonder Rosalind had stolen out here, away from the close dining-room and her mother's presence. "Is she thinking of me?" thought Gerald; "dear little heart! By what her father said she knows nothing as yet. What a shame it seems to trouble her with all these money matters; and yet I'm glad he left the telling to me. Now, whereabouts shall I find her? In the summer-house, I shouldn't wonder. Yes! there's her dog: yelping little cur! I'm a cur myself to find fault with anything that Rosey cares for."

He went towards the summer-house, which was at the end of the croquet lawn. It was a small place, and two or three trees grew

within a yard of it, so that you saw little of the garden from within. He walked across the lawn, his footsteps making no sound on the soft velvet grass ; but even if he had trod more loudly he would not have disturbed Rosalind Chastelar. She was not alone. As he came nearer he heard a voice, one that was familiar enough, though he had never listened to it with this under-current of passion pervading its tones.

“I am off as soon as I can manage it, Rosey ; it’s no use stopping here till one’s hair is grey, waiting for what will never come—not to me at least—but I couldn’t go without saying good-bye, and I could not say it before your father and mother. That’s why I sent to you to come out here. You’re not angry with me, Rosey, are you ?”

“Angry! angry! oh, Percy!”

Something in those tones froze the blood in Gerald’s veins. Could little Rosey’s rosebud lips have framed them? There was a tiger intensity of passion in them that could

only have sprung from one source. He must listen now; he must hear the worst. Had he all along been deceived and fooled? Was Percy to have the best of it in everything?

“Heaven only knows when I shall see you again, Rosey; never, perhaps. I am going to Canada. I shall make my way out there as I should never do here. If things had been different, I might have asked you to wait for me; but what chance should I have had with your mother? She’s made it up between you and Gerald, as I knew she would; and yet I did think, Rosey, that once you cared for me a little. But I hardly dare wish now that you should, my poor little Rosey.”

“Don’t speak like that, Percy; I can’t bear it. If you only knew, if you could only tell, how I hate Gerald Craven—yes, hate him! hate him! hate him!” and poor little Rosey sobbed impotently like a hurt child.

“Rosey dear! you mustn’t speak like that.” There was a tremor in the voice, which Gerald interpreted rightly. He had not

come there to play him false; it had been weak and foolish to do so, but he had not meant more than to take a last look at his lost love. He was as yet ignorant of the change in his own fortunes, and, in despair, was about to try to better them, seeking just this last solace before he left. Now Percy was seized with the dread that he should play his friend false. What could he do with this girl crying in his arms, sobbing out her hatred of his rival, her love for himself? Why had he come there? Why had he risked anything that looked like wronging the true heart that through all had been so leal to him? "Rosey!" he tried to soothe and hush her; "Rosey!" and in spite of himself, in spite of his allegiance to his friend, his arm was round her, and he was kissing her tears away. "Rosey!—O my God! Poor Gerald! Rosey deary, don't make me quite a traitor. How could you mislead him?"

"Oh, Percy! you don't know mamma!"

Then Gerald understood it all, or nearly all.

She had been compelled to take him, poor weak foolish child : she was but a child, and younger than her years, why look for a woman's self-respecting truth and courage from her ? How dared he blame her, this poor weak thing who had yet been strong enough to shipwreck all his happiness ? Must she go too, with all the rest ? It seemed so. Heaven help him !

He came forward and laid his hand on Percy's arm, not angrily, but still not quite as a friend ; that was too much to expect just then. " I don't blame you," he said, huskily, "and there's no occasion to go to Canada. If you go into the house, you will find Mrs. Chastelar quite ready to welcome you as her son-in-law. Rosey, you might have been more open with me, but I suppose one couldn't expect the truth from your mother's daughter."

Then he was gone, through the house and out in the street, and those two were alone, Rosey trembling at the thought of her



mother, Percy too shame-stricken at his apparent falsehood to his friend to realize the full meaning of the words he had addressed to him.

Of course they were married, and things went well with them. They were people upon whom ill-fortune would have been thrown away; they would have been decidedly the worse for it. Prosperity suited them admirably; they fill their positions to perfection. Percy Crane treated even his mother-in-law in a style that Gerald would never have done. Gerald Craven is working hard, and people expect great things of him; he will certainly build a name for himself, to which that of the Cravens would have been nothing. Whether he will ever win home or wife, surround himself with household ties and joys, is a question the future must solve. He is very much with Claude Ruddfield; she is sister, friend, companion, and adviser, but no one can tell whether he will ever ask her to be more. Christine Ruddfield prays and

hopes that some day, both for Claude's happiness and his own, his eyes will be opened. She is a good woman ; let us trust her prayers may be heard.

She herself is still at Stretton, and Mr. Brown, now the Rector, is content to worship though even he no longer waits, knowing that waiting can bring him nothing more than he has already : he is happy after his own fashion, just as Christine is happy after hers, though to neither has happiness come in the way they most desired it. Christine has her boy, and he has his love, just as Claude has her daily round of duty and care. Things may come round to her ; she is young, and the years are before her : if not, she will be as happy a woman, only after quite another sort, as is her cousin Rosalind,—so happy that perhaps she would no more change lots with her than her good friend the Rector would change his with that outwardly prosperous man Launcelot Chastelar.

**LONDON :**  
**R. CLAY, SONS, AND TAYLOR, PRINTERS,**  
**BREAD STREET HILL.**







